Speak the Truth

Volume Three

Twoony

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SPEAK THE TRUTH VOLUME THREE

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to those who followed Aron and Quinton’s journey through volume one to three. Thank you for all the support!

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CHAPTER ONE

Four years after the end of Volume Two

I'm going to die of boredom has always been a phrase I thought to be an extreme exaggeration but, oh boy, it certainly ain't.

I'm going to die of boredom. Straight up. No lie. Dropping dead in a minute. My eyes roll into the back of my head every time Lorrence Olaine speaks. His white whiskers slightly stained red from wine and cheeks dusted pink. He's already drunk and I'm ready to get the hell out of here! But the prince running from members of the court isn't exactly what my parents, or I, wish to see as the next big headline.

Prince Aron Vaughn bolts before Lorrence Olaine can bore him with another stupid hunting story, has a mere paragraph about the actual conversation while the remaining ninety is about my sexuality and super genius, son of a crazed killer boyfriend. Somehow everything else has become clickbait rather than what it once was; *prince is going through a phase. Oh dear, when will he drop his boyfriend and get back on track?*

Uh oh, maybe this wine is getting to me too. I'm getting a little saucy? Salty? Both? I don't know, but I down my glass of wine, hoping to drink my way out of the occasion.

"That's certainly enough," Dad whispers, appearing out of nowhere to take my glass of avoidance.

Hey, hey, gimme that back! I can't speak to these old fogies sober! You are about to get smacked, fool! Oh yeah, the wine is definitely getting to me. More reason to give it back then.

Dad smiles when asking, "Lord Olaine, would you mind if I steal my son for a moment?"

"Not at all!" Lorrence smacks my arm far too roughly, as usual. And as usual, I smile from ear to ear while imagining shaving his disgusting mustache off and throwing the remnants in his drink like the mature prince that I am. At least he has a compliment to give in his drunken stupor, "You spoke well to the court today, Your Highness. We all know you've been working—" He hiccups. "—very hard alongside His Majesty."

My response is as manufactured as they come. "Thank you. It's an honor to take the stand and I hope to continue showing my best in the future."

But it pleases Lord Olaine, nonetheless. He waddles away with a smile on his face, in search of the next poor sap to garner his attention. Once he's gone, I look at my father with a pained smile.

"How have you put up with this for so long? I'm not even as busy as you and I wanna pull my hair out," I whisper, eyeing those in the surrounding ballroom.

There are 103 members of the court. Let's put it simply, each district of Gantia gets one representative no matter what, others are given based on population count. These members are elected once every two years. Then

there’s those that are not elected but are passed down. They are the Regent, Chief of Homeland Security, Chief of Military, Chief of Health, Chief of Economy & Trade and, obviously, my father, the king.

Today there are some extras such as foreign ambassadors, along with a bit of press. To the side are tables filled with food and drink. Soft music plays from the small orchestra located a floor above, peering down at us from the open second floor. Conferences like this have become the norm for me as I’ve taken on more and more royal duties with my father, which he and mother have often argued against, but I need to prove my worth! They’re a complete drag, boring as all hell and incredibly annoying. Not everyone is as fond of me as Lord Olaine.

“You get used to it,” Dad chuckles, escorting me away from the crowd. Some smile and nod to us but none come to interrupt us, although I notice a few sneers from Mr. and Mrs. Coralline from across the room. I glare back until Dad steps in front of me to become a blockade between us.

Freaking jackasses, still trying to start shit. They better be retired when I take the throne, otherwise I’m firing them!

“That’s not what I came over here for. Aron,” Dad presses his hand to my shoulder. “Do you know what time it is?”

I check my phone. “A little after seven. Why?”

Dad frowns. “Weren’t you supposed to leave at three?”

“Trust me, I wanted to!” I’m about to throw my hand in a silly gesture to those in the room until I spot a few paparazzi watching me. Quickly, I drop my arm because anything “childish” I do is immediately brought up in the media. I’ve done well thus far to erase my past; to erase the childish, cocky, and stubborn high school boy. I can’t mess up now.

I clear my throat and stand tall when responding, “But you know how things get here. First Cherry was talking to me, then Harriot and Lorrence. I’ve been dragged around by everyone and the one time I even tried to go to the bathroom. Do you know what Harriot asked me?”

Dad grips my shoulder. I think he wants to say something, but I’m still rambling.

“She asked if I was running away from my duties to see my boyfriend?” I huff and cross my arms. “How is spending time with my partner considered running away from my duties? I’d bring him along if he wasn’t busy. Even today he had—”

Realization sets in.

Dad rubs my shoulder soothingly before the panic rushes through me.

“No, no, no,” I hiss, throwing my head in my hands. Dad pulls me close to pat my back now when I shake my head furiously. “Shit, I forgot. How the hell could I forget?!”

“It’s ok, Aron. Quinton will understand. Go now, at least spend some time with him today.”

“Spend some time with him?” I snort, stepping back in a rush. “He’s going to be pissed. I doubt he even wants to see me. Shit!”

As expected, the press looks my way, along with a few diplomats. I get the stink eye for my well known potty mouth, but right now, I don’t care. I say goodbye to my father, along with whoever attempts to stop me on my way out. Of course, as I’m going out the door, I overhear members of the court hissing under their breath the same thing I always hear.

“Off to see the Barley boy, I bet.”

I’m tempted to turn around and spit in their face that it’s Underwood, but by now most choose to acknowledge the last name of Quinton’s father.

Suppose they do it to purposefully piss us off.

“He’s immature and irresponsible, leaving the conference early. Should the prince and king not be the last to leave?”

My gut twists with discomfort, but I don’t have the time to stay and defend myself. I need to get home to Quinton, fast. My car waits for me outside, though my driver is shocked to see me. One frantic order from me and we’re peeling out of the lot.

I’m fairly certain there is funeral music playing when I get home. My home looms before me, the doors of hell open. I’m surprised my skin doesn’t blister when I step across the threshold, feeling the eyes of the castle workers watch me pitifully as I approach the death that likely awaits me. Because, you see, there’s a certain fear every person gets when they know they’ve fucked up. However, this fear is something else entirely when you know you fucked up and the person who is going to be most angry with you is the Quinton Underwood, Lord of all Hellspawns, Creator of the Underworld, Lucifer himself!

It’s why, even after being away from home for a week, I refuse to even step towards my bedroom. Ok, let’s be honest, our bedroom.

I know Quinton is in there. I know he’s probably reading or studying. I know he’s acting like he isn’t mad when he actually is… and I know we’re going to argue.

But I don’t want to argue. I’ve been at a boring conference with a bunch of old, simple-minded, stuck up politicians for a week! The court members either want to drink or play golf, neither of which I am a fan of. Then we stand around talking about politics until my father and I leave the room, or at least they think I do, then they talk about me. When will my “phase” end

and who is willing to bring up at the next meeting whether I'm fit for the throne, the usual.

So yeah, now all I want to do is have a perfectly normal conversation about some dumb show or the crappy songs on the radio like a normal person. Sure, Quinton doesn't always enjoy those topics but I can get him to indulge me from time to time. I have my ways! By ways I mean force, I just keep talking until he gives in. Hey, if it works, it works!

Actually, I don't care if we talk about something I wanna talk about. In fact, we can talk about whatever he wants to! Let's discuss physics or chemistry or how black holes function; does that fall under physics? I don't know, all that science jargon is up his alley. I don't get any of it, just; I don't want to argue. Except I kind of deserve a good lecturing this time, well, most times. Honestly, I'm not the brightest. Knowing that doesn't make it any easier to open the bedroom door, though.

Peering into the room, I find Quinton sitting at his desk—that's a complete mess, which is immediately a red flag—looking over some school work. Seeing it reminds me why I'm in trouble in the first place.

Damn, what do I say? Sorry? But I say that so much that I don't even think it means anything anymore. Why are relationships so complicated? I don't think I have the mindset for this.

Quinton has to know I'm in the room. It's so quiet that the door can be heard clicking shut, yet he doesn't look back at me. The lack of any response chills me to my core. I rather him be calling me an idiot or something other than this terrifying garbage. I'm left shivering like a leaf in my room, too scared to take a step like I expect said room to suddenly explode. Obviously, that doesn't happen, but I wouldn't be surprised if Quinton rigged this place with something one day to mess with me.

“I’m... I’m back,” I call out, even if it’s obvious.

He doesn’t answer.

Well, this is off to such a great start, isn’t it?! I thought I was the immature one. What do I do when he’s the immature one?! Panic, that’s about it.

Even if I know I deserve his anger, I just want to explain myself or at least try to. But where do I start? What do I say? How do I explain to him I really didn’t mean to miss his convention? It’s not like he’ll believe me, seeing as he was talking about it to me for months! Months!

Hell, he’s been working on his school project for even longer! And when his paper passed, and he was offered to talk about it before an entire room of people at some fancy shmancy science convention, he was ecstatic. As he should be! I’m ecstatic too, to see him doing so well. It makes me proud and happy for him. I knew the date; I knew the time, and it was so close to the conference that we both knew I could make it...except I didn’t. Again. Someone would remind me as the time drew near. I’d try to leave. Someone would drag me into another conversation and the nerves of messing up in front of a room of hundreds of people made me forget. I’m a walking ball of nerves.

“I’m sorry about the convention.” My voice shakes. I try so hard to stop, but it doesn’t work. “There was just so much to do. Dad had me going to so many meetings and interviews and, well, you know how those old geezers are. Once they talk politics, they never shut up! And it’d be rude to just leave and—”

And what? I don’t know, and the humor—is it really humor though?—isn’t helping, especially when I see Quinton’s shoulders roll. He wants to yell; I know he does. He wants to argue with me about how “we talked

about this” or “you promised you’d be there,” because we’ve had this argument before, so many times that I’ve lost count and I hate myself for it. Each time I feel worse than the last, yet nothing changes and it’s always me.

Always me missing important events, forgetting important dates... breaking promises. I should have learned by now, but we both know I’m an idiot and that isn’t going to happen. I always try so hard to be there for Quinton, but that’s a lot easier said than done. With my royal duties and school, it’s difficult. More difficult than I ever imagined.

“I know it meant a lot to you. I know I promised to be there and I am sorry, really! If... if you want to yell at me, I understand. I deserve it, but please, don’t ignore me. Whatever you want to say, say it, pl—”

“Does it matter?” Quinton interjects, finally allowing me to hear his voice that’s trembling similarly to my own; except his is from holding back his anger. However, his eyes aren’t holding anything back when he faces me, allowing that dark gaze of his to freeze me in place. “You couldn’t make it, I understand. You should have called to at least let me know. It pisses me off, but I’ll get over it.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“That, what you always do!” I’m throwing my hands about like that’ll help at all. It doesn’t, and it seems to annoy Quinton by the way he’s scrunching his nose. “I know it bothers you, but your response shouldn’t just be I’ll get over it, it should be talking with me or telling me how it makes you feel—”

“We’ve already done that and you already know how it makes me feel, Aron.”

I actually hate it when he speaks my name during an argument. The way his voice cuts me, like my name has been turned into a blade. I can't handle it.

Quinton continues glaring and I still feel like I am looking upon death itself. It isn't funny, not in the least.

"This has happened so many times already, and we always have this same discussion." Quinton slams his book shut. I jump at the sound, though I stand my ground when Quinton rises from his chair with his work in hand to stride over to me. He's standing before me with a scowl and brows furrowed. "What else do you want me to say? Do you want me to repeat the same thing over and over? Do you think it will make you feel better? Do you think it will make me feel better? Because it doesn't."

"What will make you feel better?"

"I'll feel better when you stop making promises you can't keep."

My heart clenches so tightly I fear it may disintegrate into nothing, full on Thanos snapped style. I can't say anything to that, knowing full well that I deserve it and he's right. It hurts and I don't know what to do. I hate the way he's looking at me and I hate the way I've been fucking things up time and time again. I...I just wish things could be like they were before.

I wish we could be like we were before.

"I've got to work on my thesis," Quinton sighs after he realizes I've got nothing more to say. "Leave me alone for a while."

I want to argue that we've already been apart for a while, but the words lodge in my throat. With that, he walks out of our room, slamming the door shut behind him. The sound makes me flinch once more and my body remains in place until I can no longer hear the stomping of his feet.

Shit, I did it again. I screwed up bad. It seems that's all I can do lately.

It’s not like I’m always busy, which makes it even worse, actually. This is my senior year of college, Quinton’s too. While my school work has lessened considerably, his has skyrocketed. He’s continuing on into grad school, so he’s just moving up the education ladder while I’m content with a bachelor’s degree. That is already a miracle, so let’s not even discuss more than that! My brain may actually jump out of my skull to beat me to death if I put it through anymore years of torturous school work.

Quinton though, we all knew he was destined for greatness and greatness is exactly what he’s been achieving. He’s busy with classes, with showing off his work, hoping to get into a great grad program, which we all know he’ll definitely do. Grad schools would be crazy not to take him. Freaking perfectionist bastard. Yet, even with all that, Quinton never breaks a promise.

If he says he’ll be at a conference for me, he’ll be there. If he says he’ll be home for dinner at 7, then he’s home at 6:45. If he says he’ll take a day off for my birthday, he takes the day off while I can’t seem to do any of that.

I’ve been attending more meetings with Dad. I’ve gone overseas to meet diplomats or had to interact with them while they were here. There are press conferences, photoshoots, interviews with the press and TV shows, you name it and I’ve done it. One thing after the other, everything blurs together. Always proving myself to the masses and even more so to the court members, those that I’m meant to work with when Dad retires. Years from now, but it’ll happen, so I’m doing everything I can to prove I’ll be the great king I’ve already promised everyone. That means I’m getting busier in my own way.

Damn, that speech in high school screwed me hard. Why did I run off at the mouth again? Now I have so much to live up to and I ain’t ok with that.

I’m already troubled, but I just had to go and act all... princely. Freaking stupid.

There’s been the usual get-togethers though, with members of the court and typical things that I’ve done all my life but are now intensifying since I’m old enough to understand what’s going on. I try to do everything I can to be more like my father, to be the king this country deserves. It wouldn’t be such an issue if it didn’t always clash with my personal life. Everything seems to fall when something important is going on, like Quinton’s convention, where he was in front of an audience of hundreds of people talking about the work he’s been doing for years.

That was a big deal for him and he asked me months ago if I’d attend, even if we both knew I would barely understand a word. He even brought it up every now and again like an alarm clock reminding me; *don’t forget, don’t forget again Aron, you promised.* While he never said it in those exact words, the meaning was there. The look in his eyes was always consistent; *please be there this time.*

Obviously, I wanted to go, even if it was a nerdy talk that would make my brain turn to mush in half a second. Quinton has worked his ass off with every project he’s been given. He’s Mr. Perfect Bastard after all. As if he wouldn’t get into the convention, hell would freeze over before they denied him.

Still, I missed almost every speech he has given. We’ve never attended any college function together. How many times have I missed his birthday or our anniversary, planned dates? The more I think about it, the more I realize how lousy I’ve been. I don’t mean to. It’s hard keeping my schedule together, but when I say it like that, it sounds like I’m making an excuse. Which I’m not. I really, really don’t mean to be so utterly useless.

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CHAPTER TWO

Sighing, I sit on our bed, twisting the comforter between my fingers. Our room is meant to put me at ease, but all I feel is discomfort. Especially when I keep gazing over at Quinton's desk, seeing the papers strewn about like he was ripping through them earlier from frustration. It's usually so tidy and clean, but when Quinton gets upset, he shows it through small actions that just scream something is off.

I should go after him. In the beginning, I did. I once followed him through the halls, into the library, and just sat there with him. He would glare. I would glare. We'd argue some more and by the end of the night we'd be back to our usual selves; me being totally awesome and him being a kinda awesome, but obviously less than me, hell spawn. The way it should always be!

But, lately, that hasn't been working.

Quinton stopped responding. I stopped going after him. It's childish to chase him around, as if my apologies will change anything. It's like we've both given up and... that scares me. It scares me so much that sometimes I'm too frightened to talk to him because I hate seeing the look of absolute defeat and exhaustion in his eyes.

When did everything go so wrong? I don't even remember. Not that surprising, but I would appreciate it if my brain would get better at remembering things.

All I can do is to clean up his desk. He hates messes. I know where everything goes and while some papers are filled with gibberish, but he has them marked so they're easy to place in order. I put all the writing utensils in the very colorful and sparkly coffee mug he was gifted. I chuckle at the memory.

Quinton came home once with a bright rainbow mug that had me cackling. It was clearly made by some young kids after seeing the shaky hand writing in glitter that read; Q for Queen. When I asked how and why he had it, he replied, "A family came up to me with their kids. I couldn't say no to them."

Since he obviously would not drink out of it, we put the mug on his desk. He's gotten a few other gifts that he keeps, although he refuses to mention them. Still, it's nice and I can tell he likes it. Why else would he keep it all? Freaking guy is almost 21 years old, you'd think he'd open up a bit more to people but nope, as cold as ever.

It's when I finish organizing his desk that the door opens. I spin around so fast that my feet slip and I fall straight on my ass with a surprised yelp. Fuck you too, floors! Or socks. I don't know whose fault it is, so, y'know what? Fuck you both!

“Sweetie, are you ok?” Mom giggles when stepping into the room.

“Fine,” I groan, lingering on the ground for a moment. The world is still spinning. Let me regain my composure, but none of my pride.

“Where’s Quinton?”

I bite my lip. Hearing his name sends a frigid chill down my spine. The lack of response clues my mom in. She frowns instantly.

“Oh, I’m sure Quinton understands, Aron. You didn’t mean to miss and he just—”

“He needs to cool down?” I interrupt, sitting up to finally look at my mom with a frown that mirrors her own. “But he has every right to be mad. How many times have I promised to show up to something and didn’t?”

Mom doesn’t answer because she probably lost count, too.

“Did you have this problem with Dad? Tell me it isn’t hereditary and I’m screwed cause I need to stop screwing everything up.”

“Aron, don’t say that,” Mom sighs, quickly coming over to help me off the floor. I say help, but honestly, if she had to pick me up, she’d drop me after a second. She guides me to the bed, where we take a seat. She reaches for my hand and holds it in her lap. “I know things have been difficult lately.”

I snort.

“Well, things are always difficult, but this is just another hurdle that you two will get through, I know it. It’s tough having your duties as a prince and a boyfriend, but Quinton understands. And you’re right, he has every right to be frustrated and you should feel bad about it. It was pretty shitty.”

I let out a soft laugh, shaking my head at Mom when she playfully elbows me.

“Your dad and I had our own obstacles, as will you and Quinton. For one, I wasn’t on my way to going to grad school so that’s something all of its own, but everything will be ok, Aron. If there’s anyone who can get through this, it’s you two.”

With that, she presses a kiss to my cheek before instructing me to pull up the video she took of the convention on the TV. She asks if I want her to stick around for a while, to which I shake my head. She leaves, allowing me to sit alone while hoping that she’s right. I need her to be right.

I tell myself everything will be ok.

Everything will be ok.

As expected, I don’t understand the convention. Mom got some videos of other students as well, which I immediately skipped after a minute or so. Even if I only get the gist of what Quinton’s saying, I still give him my complete attention. I wonder if he felt as proud as I do.

When he was standing up on stage, was he happy? Because I’m happy just watching it. He’s too cool. Not that I would tell him that. The way he holds himself, how he doesn’t stumble over his words or repeats, uh, like someone I know (hi, that’s me); one would think he’s the future heir, not me.

Nothing has changed. I would be annoyed, but at this point, who cares anymore? Ok, I still kind of care. He is such an annoying bastard, but that is not the point!

I’m not sure how far along into the speech I am when the door opens. This time, it’s the very person I’ve been waiting and hoping for, or perhaps dreading, depending on how you look at it.

I quickly pause the recording.

“Hey,” I hum, trying to give a smile.

Quinton takes in the image on the screen before looking back at me. His expression is stone cold, causing the air in the room to mimic it. Bitch should seriously go to the arctic and solve global warming already. Come on, Quinton, you're slacking!

"How...how's your thesis going?" I ask.

"Good," he answers, his voice nothing like it was earlier, helping ease the tension immediately. That's the first good sign. The second is when he sits his work on the desk and walks towards me rather than keeping his distance. "Your mom recorded it?"

"Yeah."

"Why are you watching? I doubt you understand a word." And that's the final sign Quinton is back to normal.

I release a sigh of relief. He sits next to me with that annoying smirk of his, though I rather not admit aloud that I'm happy to see it. The space between us quickly disappears while we both move over so that we're sitting side by side. His arm swings around my shoulders to pull me close. Again, won't say it out loud, but I've missed him. Being gone for a week sucks. I could barely sleep in that stupid hotel room.

I made a mistake once to google why I have trouble sleeping away from home. Turns out a person can become accustomed to sharing a bed with someone and when that someone isn't there, it causes a lack of sleep. I will never, ever, ever tell Quinton that. He cannot know! The power would be too great. He already rules over hell, that is enough!

Knowing him, he probably already knows, though.

"I get the gist of it," I answer, looking at him with a teasing grin. "Besides, I like when you talk nerdy to me."

He whacks me over the back of the head for that one. Hey, that was hilarious. He should be laughing. I'm a hoot.

Smiling, I curl closer, and Quinton quickly holds me. His lips press gently into my temple in a soft and silent kiss that makes my toes curl beneath the blankets. Time has changed us, in a way. Public displays of affection are a tad more frequent, although not as often as some. Alone time though, that's definitely different. When we're alone, it's more unusual that we aren't together than it is to see us apart. I'm not sure when it happened, it simply became that way over time. Bit by bit, we let ourselves until it became the norm.

We sit like this, together, for the rest of the recording. Quinton speaks up to explain certain sections, pausing it every now and again when I ask a question. It's fun listening to him even if I don't find any sort of science enjoyable, but Quinton's tone makes learning fun. I guess it's the fact that he's happy that I like it, that he's doing something with his life that he wants to do, and of course, he's freaking perfect at it.

Am I slightly annoyed? Of course! But am I insanely proud? Abso-fucking-lutely! Will I tell him that? No. Because his ego is too big as it is. The universe would explode if it got any worse. I'm basically Iron Man, protecting the wild from mass destruction. I deserve a medal for keeping Quinton in check!

"You could have made it a bit more entertaining," I say at the end, looking up at him to find a glare. "Like slipping on the stairs on the way down."

"Why would I do that? Humiliating oneself is your job."

I purse my lips that quickly turn into a smile at seeing his own grin form. I turn slightly in his arms to lean in for a kiss. I almost hate how easily my body just fits against his now, how it feels so natural for his arms to be

around me, to feel his lips moving eagerly against my own. It's warm and comforting and feels like home. It should after being together for over four years. It has gone by so fast that sometimes I don't think it's real.

Pulling away, I rest my forehead against his. There's a desire to apologize again, but I'm not sure if Quinton wants to hear that. Thankfully, (or not, I don't know), Quinton has something else to say, "Tristan Kharan approached me at the convention."

My eyes widen before I lean back. Quinton's dark eyes are locked on me, waiting for a response that I give in a low whisper, "As in the head of that super fancy Northview University with the grad program you were checking out over Greenly?"

Quinton nods.

I'm hesitant to ask. My heart is racing. "What did he say?"

"That he was impressed with my work and wished to speak more. We exchanged contact information and I have plans to meet him at his lab next week."

My heart stops.

I should be excited. I'm sure Quinton is. He mentioned that program a year or two ago as one that he was seriously looking into. Greenly was number one on his list for years, but lately he has been speaking of Northview a lot. Now the head of that university wants to meet with him personally? He basically has the invitation already, but…

Northview University is three hours away. We're already struggling as we are now, add in a three-hour travel time and we'll be doomed. It'll all be my fault too, I'm sure of it.

"That's... that's great, Quinton." I put on a smile anyway, one that Quinton has to see through, judging by his furrowed brow. Still, I'm a

sucker for punishment because I continue acting as if my insides aren't being electrified. "He'd be an idiot not to let you into the program, although after spending more than an hour with you, he'll probably regret it based on your piss poor personality."

"Your enthusiasm is much appreciated, Princess."

I bite my lip and cross my arms. Quinton retracts his own arms from me when I turn away, clearing my throat and keeping my gaze on anything but Quinton.

We have too much shit in our room. I should throw some of Quinton's sciency junk out. Get us a pinball machine or something, although we have one in the game room, but still, isn't that cooler to have than some weird tubey things? What even are they? Looks like gerbils should run through them, but sometimes I swear the strange liquid is poison or some shit. He probably has been slipping it into my food for years. Wait, is it the Quinton fangirl syndrome? That explains so much!

"Aron."

I act like I can't hear him.

"Stop freaking out. It's not set in stone. We're speaking with one another, that's all. I've still got research to do on my end. I may not even go."

I know he's trying to make me feel better and, yeah, it's kind of working. Either way, I'm worried. Glancing at him from the corner of my eye, I find Quinton looking at me with an almost confused expression, like he somehow doesn't get why I'm worrying. He can't be thinking differently than me, right? I mean, we just had a fight about me missing another engagement, but he isn't concerned about that getting worse after he gets on some fancy grad program and likely moves away?

We already only really see each other on weekends, even though we basically live together! Our time will probably lessen later on and that's terrifying. I'm already messing shit up. It's going to get worse and what are we going to do? What am I going to do? I can hardly keep this together. We've got so much on our plates already. I'm beyond full. I'm about to explode!

"Aren't you worried?" I finally ask, facing him with a solemn expression that only baffles him more.

"About?"

"Us."

"What about us?"

"We only really have time to see each other on weekends. We both have school and I have my royal duties. Our schedules will get busier after graduating, but I'm already fucking this up as we are now. We're doomed if you move farther away. Don't you get that?"

"Normally I wouldn't argue about you being a screwup."

"Hey!"

"But what exactly are you claiming to be fucking up?" Quinton asks, yet he calls me the dumb one.

"We literally just had an argument."

"That had nothing to do with our lack of time together. It had to do with you breaking a promise."

It hurts hearing him say that. I twist my neck to the side in discomfort, choosing not to say anything.

"Just because the school is farther away doesn't mean our time will be cut short. I've looked into it and spoke with past grad students. We make our own work schedules. Don't get carried away with any of this. We have time

and we will discuss everything together," Quinton explains slowly and softly, because he's trying to calm me down. It's working and I'm left feeling like a fool for immediately assuming Quinton didn't already have this all planned out. As if he didn't have detailed plans jotted down and color coded, the freaking lovable sack of a shit nerd.

I kind of hate how easily Quinton calms me, but after so long he's a bit of a professional at it, at least when he wants to be. Sometimes the bastard is exactly that, a bastard that allows me to freak out until he deems it no longer funny. Why did I fall for him again? I seriously need to have better taste. I'm the prince. The prince should get someone worthy of him!

But let's be honest, Quinton is far more princely than I am. Freaking jackass!

"Sorry," I apologize, bringing my hand up to ruffle my hair. My fingers twist into it for a moment before dropping back to my side. "I just...it's been hard lately—"

"I know. It's fine."

It's fine.

I feel like Quinton says that far too much lately. It should make me feel better. Everyone wants their partner to be understanding. At the same time, I wish Quinton wasn't. It's twisted in a way, but I don't say anything about it, choosing to nod and do as Quinton requests, which is to get some sleep. We both change and return to bed, where Quinton passes out the moment he hits the mattress.

I, on the other hand, wrap my arms around him and lay awake for what feels like hours, wondering how the hell I'm going to keep this relationship of ours together.

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CHAPTER THREE

“You did seriously fuck up.”

“Wow, Autumn, thanks for the emotional support.”

“You’re welcome!” Autumn sings while I roll my eyes.

“Did Quinton...talk to you about it or anything?” I ask, sitting out on the balcony with my phone against my ear.

The sun is warm on my skin. From time to time I glance back in our room, expecting to see Quinton standing there with a scowl, which is stupid. He’s still in class and won’t even come home tonight. He’s staying at his apartment near campus since he has a late class and early one in the morning.

“You mean did he talk to me about you? Yes, yes he did,” she says.

“Spill.”

“He will skin me alive.”

“Like he scares you.”

“True!” Autumn giggles before letting out a heavy sigh. I get the feeling that Quinton said a lot judging by her sudden silence. It causes me to squirm uncomfortably.

What did the bastard say? I probably deserve all of it, but that doesn’t mean it won’t bother me! I will be very bothered. Someone gimme a stress ball, I need to squeeze the hell out of it.

“Listen, Aron, I think you know what he said.”

I have a hunch, but do go on.

“It upset him and, honestly, I can’t blame him for it. You missed his birthday last year. You made countless plans to have actual, real dates and they fall through almost every time but you never rescheduled. It’s always Quinton choosing a new time to go, always him asking or reminding you. You missed your anniversary last year, was late to one the year before that, made it to a few of his speeches and the two times you were meant to go to his hometown for a visit fell through.”

And each mention causes my chest to ache in ways I can’t explain. I know, I know I’ve screwed up a lot, and it’s not just that. There’s so much more that Quinton doesn’t complain about but I know he hates, like having to have his own security detail. Only two months after he started school he got jumped by some guys that weren’t so fond of my father. He had to get his own security after that. He never really wanted to make friends, but he sure as hell didn’t make any after having a bunch of guards following him.

There're paparazzi everywhere, which caused him to lose his work study position. He can’t get a normal job either for obvious reasons, which he hates. He hates having my parents pay for so much but he can’t do anything about it.

There are rumors, lies spread online, gossip magazines, pictures invading our privacy, even some people attempting to get pervy shots through his apartment window. Members of the court, the news, and the public have a field day with us. We're ridiculed for our clothes, posture, speech patterns, anything and everything that makes him, or me, appear not royal enough, too childish, or not good enough and it's maddening. Let's not even discuss the sexuality portion of it. One can easily take a guess what that's like.

Both of us are constantly put under a magnifying glass. We aren't manly enough or we're bad influences on the youth. Obviously there are those with us and against us, but long story short, Quinton tolerates a lot because of me. More than I probably even know about. Yet he never complains, never argues, never tells me he hates it or feels out of place. Sometimes it worries me. I kind of wish he would get angry.

If he's upset, I want him to tell me. If he's bothered, I want him to tell me. Just because we know nothing will change doesn't mean we shouldn't talk about it. Yeah, paparazzi sucks. I've been putting up with them all my life, so I know. Lately it's been more difficult. Lately I've paid far more attention than usual, but I have to. I need to. Quinton doesn't. He can tell me about what happens. Hell, I'd love to complain for hours about all the invasion of our privacy. However, Quinton never does. I wonder if he's doing it for himself or for me.

"I don't know what to do, Autumn," I finally sigh, rubbing my temple as I lean back. I've been thinking about it for the last few days and have yet to come up with any way to make this permanently better. "It's not like it will change. Eventually Dad will give up his work entirely to me, years from now, but it will happen. When it does, I'll have even more responsibilities. Not to mention, if we're still together, Quinton will take on royal duties,

too. What... what if Quinton realizes he doesn't want to put up with this life anymore?"

"You don't have to have all these responsibilities now," Autumn grumbles. She, Quinton, my parents, all our friends really have already said this. They claim I'm putting too much work on myself, but they don't understand. I have to. If I take a break for even a second, I'll be left in the dust.

"Autumn."

"I know, I know, you are doing your best." She sighs. "Ok, but you need to have faith in him. Quinton is with you because he loves you. Yeah, you both go through a lot, but we all do in our own ways. You just have to keep moving forward regardless of the obstacles. Don't worry about it too much, ok?"

"That's easier said than done," I mumble, earning myself a soft 'yeah' from Autumn. "Thanks though. Got any suggestions on how I can make it up to him, though?"

"Rough sex?"

"You're useless."

"Hey, you asked." Autumn laughs. "Why don't we all hang out this weekend? I'll ask everyone to head over. We can have a big game night at your place."

"If I can make it. With my luck, something will come up."

"Then we don't tell Quinton. If it falls through, he won't know about it. If it works, he'll get a surprise party!"

"He hates surprises."

"He can get over it. It's gonna be great!"

Shaking my head, I agree with Autumn's plans. Even if Quinton pretends to be constantly annoyed, we all know he loves it when the whole gang hangs out. We don't get to see each other as often as we used to. Sure, Langley and I see each other almost daily because of class, but Ariel, our friends from college, Nora and Cassidy, as well as Autumn, and our newest addition, Dahlton, have their own lives.

Quinton could probably do without seeing Dahlton. Ever since Autumn introduced him as her boyfriend about a year and a half ago, Quinton has gone into overprotective brother mode. It's hilarious, like watching a wolf trying to enter a pack with Quinton being the alpha that isn't taking his shit. He even threatened him a few times, y'know, the whole, "you hurt her I'm coming after you" bit? Except it's worse because Quinton can get his hands on some pretty nasty chemicals that could probably dispose of Dahlton's corpse in under an hour. I seriously need to record their interactions because they are to die for!

"Your Highness."

I turn in my chair to find Kingsley standing in my doorway with a kind smile.

"Tana Elmer of Gateway News is here for your interview," he says.

"Thank you, I'll be right out, Kingsley." I give him a smile that he nods at before disappearing.

Shaking my head, I walk inside and take a glance at myself in the mirror. It's crazy how different I am compared to high school, but I guess that's to be expected. Not only because I'm older, but also because I'm in the public eye even more. I must have "acceptable" hair, so shorter and easier to style. I have to dress "appropriately" so no ripped jeans or hoodies. Even the way I stand is different. I stand tall, shoulders straight and confident. The strong

and capable prince. The future king. At least, that's what I have to put across. Sometimes I don't even recognize myself.

I don't have time for such thoughts. Putting on a smile, I waltz out of the room to head for the office in the lower left wing of the house. That's where we always have interviews with news channels or magazines. Lately I've been doing a lot more of them, mostly for things like teen magazines or college students. I prefer them since they're more down to earth, but when they ask really personal questions, it's invasive.

"Your Highness," Tana, as well as her colleagues, say when I enter the room. All stand quickly and bow. I used to ask them to stop. Now I know it won't happen so I offer up a smile instead.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's not a problem at all, Your Highness! Thank you for giving us a moment of your time today," Tana says while gesturing for her team to come forward.

I'm introduced to them all, the cameraman, the director and so on. I've gotten used to it, the setup for an interview, getting some makeup on—which Quinton absolutely hates and, oh boy, is it funny—as well as a mic here or there. Before I know it, the interview starts.

Most of the questions have to do with current political standings such as bills my father wishes to have passed, some of which I've even had a hand in writing. I've been working on a new Green Bill for some time, but I can't give many details on it, so we move on to discussions concerning business ties with countries overseas. I kind of impress myself during these interviews. It isn't so bad to be capable of answering intelligently. See Quinton, you're not the only smart one! I bet you can't…

Wait, no, he has totally discussed all this with political officials before. I talk to him about it. Dad talks to him about it. Damn it, how am I ever going to win over him?!

But Tana takes a turn from politics for a more personal question. “We’ve heard some news that your partner, Quinton, is doing well in his studies. At his last convention, he was caught on camera speaking with Tristan Kharan of Northview University. Has there been any discussion of him attending?”

And way to sucker punch me in the gut, Madam!

I was doing so well and now I feel like I’ve dropped a thousand feet. Of course, someone would bring that up. Quinton’s academics usually always slips into my interviews. Yes, I get it, I’m dating a smart son of a bitch, but must we always remind me of that? Still, in this case, I find it more difficult to answer.

“Quinton is considering all his options, and I don’t think it’s appropriate for me to discuss them without his permission.”

“Ah, I see. Our viewers have been so interested wondering how that may affect you two.”

Cool. Same.

“That would be quite a distance and, with the duties you have already, there’s been talk of how a long distance relationship may work.”

I amaze myself with my own ability to force a smile. I’ve gotten better at it the last few years, but Quinton can always call me out on my shit. The news, though? Not so much, and it helps me out of this sticky situation, and all the ones before or those to come after.

I never enjoy talking to them about Quinton, or dating. Them old folks on the council don’t like it either. They switch from it simply not being a proper topic to discuss to whispering homophobic slurs behind my back.

Some, not all, but still annoying to put up with. And if I screw up or act the least bit differently than what they expect, they simply have to blame it on my sexuality, as if it has anything to do with it. I try my best not to bring my sexuality or dating life up. I do everything I can to stay off their radar, yet, one way or another, it all leads back to the same thing. I never know what to say or do in those situations...

“I’m confident we will make it work, no matter where he is,” I eventually reply, although my gut screams that I’m lying through my teeth.

“Your commitment to each other is definitely inspiring. Your relationship has been on for over four years. Your five-year anniversary is in a few months. April, right?”

Hearing someone say that actually makes me blush a bit. Yes, it’s noticed, but I pretend like Tana isn’t smiling gleefully at me when I reply, “Yes, it is.”

“And he is living here in the palace, attending committees with the royal family. He’s even well loved and accepted by many well-known politicians here and overseas. Have there been any thoughts of a possible marriage in the future?”

Fucking hell, what?

My eyes widen and jaw drops, but she ain’t done and, damn, I am not ready for the first question, let alone the next.

“Or any talk of how that will go about, considering the laws set upon the royal families?”

“Uh,” I bite my lip.

I’m not meant to say “uh” while speaking. My instructor will whack me over the head with a brick! But I can’t come up with another response. It’s not like Quinton and I haven’t heard the *are you gonna get hitched*

question, but getting hit by that as well as the lawful side of it is making me go dizzy. Someone hold me up, I'm gonna drop!

"There... there hasn't really been a discussion about either of those things." I clear my throat. "Should it come up, I'm sure we'll find a way to go about it."

Tana smiles and, with that, she moves on to issues I feel far more comfortable discussing.

Great, cause I'm on the verge of passing out. I can't handle such questions. They always throw me for a loop. How am I meant to answer that? Shit, do my responses make me seem like an ass? Cause, like, it kind of comes across as I don't want to get married to Quinton, which... well…

I don't know. We haven't talked about it together. There have been questions in interviews, but we usually dodge them or reply similarly with we aren't ready yet or it's too soon to discuss comments.

Marriage is so...adult-like. We are technically adults though, so does that mean we should have talked about it together? Should we sit down and ask each other; *yo, wanna get hitched someday?* Or is it better to just pop the question? More importantly, who is supposed to do it? Cause, like our dating debacle, if I ask, he'll say no, but if he asks, I'll say no. Damn, this is a real issue. What am I supposed to do? Has Quinton thought about it?

Shit, I'm getting sick. Is there a bucket somewhere so I can throw up my feelings? No? Ok, cool then.

Once that interview is complete, there's another with some magazine and another with a separate news channel. I don't bother remembering most of their names, which might be dickish of me but, really, they feel the same most of the time. Either it's about politics or my relationship with Quinton. One had the audacity once to ask who the woman was in our relationship, if

I was the top or the bottom. Let’s just say that Quinton is very good at making people cry when he’s given proper motivation to annihilate their souls. And that specific reporter isn’t allowed back on the premises.

This life takes its toll in more ways than one. The news is always buzzing about us. It feels like people are either nothing but supportive or absolutely hate us. It’s why Quinton and I steer clear of basically all social media. While in public, we’re very careful; rarely holding hands, hugging or... well, acting like a couple.

When all is said and done, I’m mentally and physically exhausted. Once I’m alone, I slink back into the chair like a pile of goo and let out the longest groan of all mankind.

“Didn’t go well?”

My head pops up to find Dad standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame with a smile.

“No, it was fine, just... blah.” I stick my tongue out childishly.

“Trust me, I know.”

“Have you ever thought about Quinton and I getting married?”

Dad is as shocked to hear that question as I am to have asked it. Even after all these years, my mouth can’t communicate with my brain. I go off sometimes and this is one of those times. Too late to back out now though, Dad heard me and he’s grinning so mischievously it hurts.

Do I flip him off for it? Yes, yes I do, because he’s being an ass. He let it slide because of my slip up and his great enjoyment in said slip up.

“Marriage?” Dad actually cackles. “What brought this up all of a sudden?”

“Nothing,” I lie, sitting up straight while rubbing nervously at the back of my neck.

Dad comes over and sits in the seat where the reporters once were. He pulls himself closer and leans in to show he's listening.

"That's too serious a question for nothing to have brought it up. Come on, Aron, talk to me. I'm listening," he says.

But this is so hard to talk about. Not because I haven't considered it. Obviously it's been brought up, but only in interviews, not with my parents or friends or even Quinton. When someone puts it like that though, being together for over four years, living together, attending functions for the royal family and so on; marriage feels like a possibility. No, it almost feels right, like this is something we need to discuss as a real possibility for the future.

Our future.

I don't know what to say. Blurt it out? Be honest? Beat around the bush? Panic? I'm already doing that. However, looking at Dad, I see nothing but love and care. He's here to listen. I know he is.

Honestly, he and Mom have probably already talked about the prospect. They are married, they've gone through this, so he is the best person to go to and I know he'll be real with me. I think I need that right now before I do something stupid; like bring it up to Quinton before he's ready to talk about it. Fuck, just thinking about it makes me want to curl into a ball and die!

"We've been asked in interviews before about marriage in our future," I finally reply. "It never really felt like a possibility before, or it just felt like we were too young. I guess we still are. I don't know how to explain it, but now it feels so different."

"How so?"

"We've been together for over four years. We're adults, young adults, but still grown up enough to be thinking about these things. He's living with

us!” I gesture haphazardly around the room like that explains anything. “And he is a part of our family already, but we’ve never talked about it together. I never asked if he wanted to get married to anyone and he’s never asked me. Plus, when I answer in these interviews, it comes across like I don’t want to marry Quinton, which isn’t true!”

Dad grins. Damn, I gotta phrase that better.

“Not to say that I wanna marry him, either.”

Dad rolls his eyes. That’s unnecessary!

“And what if we do get married? What about the legality of it? Is he actually a queen or a king? Does he have power? Can it even be legal? And should I talk about it with him? Should I wait? Am I overreacting? Am I only thinking about this because of others and, if so, is that ok? Dad, what’s wrong with me? These thought processes are your fault, right?” I glare at him. “It’s definitely your fault.”

“First of all.” Dad leans back and holds up his hand in a back off sort of manner. “That’s not nice. It’s totally your mom’s fault.”

“I smell lies.”

“Second of all, I would be worried if you weren’t this anxious about marriage.”

Huh? Really?

I give Dad a confused stare that says enough.

“Marriage is a big deal. It’s a commitment. It shouldn’t be taken lightly. Regardless of how or why you are considering marriage, it’s alright to feel this way, Aron. It’s ok to be worried, to not know what to do or how to act, to worry over how your partner feels, that’s good because it means you understand the importance. However, it’s up to you whether to discuss this with Quinton now or later. Either way, you need to talk about it if you are

this serious about him, which we all know you are, so don't play that you aren't."

I purse my lips but say nothing. Dad's right. I can still act annoyed about it!

"And, third, don't worry about titles and politics." Dad waves his hand through the air dismissively. "I've already looked into it. Quinton will have the proper title of King Consort, but that's basically a queen, so he'll have all the power your mother has. I'm sure he'd absolutely love having Q for Queen turn into Q is Queen."

I can't help but laugh. Imagining the look on his face when he finds out. Oh, so priceless! I will get that on camera! If that actually happens or whatever. I don't know. Think about this later, Aron!

Nervously, I ask, "Has Quinton ever...said anything to you or mom?"

"What? About marriage?"

I nod.

"Duh know, you should ask him."

"That makes it seem like he did, or you're messing with me?"

Dad is having way too much fun. He grins so large I fear his face may crack in half.

"I should have never asked you," I growl, getting up to leave until Dad grabs me and pulls me back into place.

"Don't be like that! Come on, it was an important discussion. We were having a moment!"

"I don't want a moment with you! Leave me alone!"

"You may be a college kid, but you're still adorable when you're mad."

"Don't treat me like a kid!"

Even with Dad’s teasing, I can honestly admit I feel better. At least enough to properly function, well, as properly as I can function, anyway.

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CHAPTER FOUR

"I'm on my way! Stall him a little longer!"

"Dahlton, tell Quinton you got me pregnant!"

I choke on my saliva, causing Autumn to cackle maniacally.

"I said stall, not get him arrested for murder," I hiss into the phone. I glance out the car window at the familiar surroundings passing by. My driver is already going as quick as the entourage will let him. Checking my watch, I'm ten minutes late for Quinton's "surprise" party.

Dahlton and Autumn are distracting him, and it seems he's growing suspicious. I didn't get held up this time. Traffic got in the way! If it isn't one thing, it's the other. Everyone had to hide in order to not ruin the surprise. Once again, I feel like shit for not being there on time, but at least I'm going!

"When will you get here?" Autumn asks.

"Give me ten more minutes."

“Cool. We set everything up in the arcade room, so go wait there.”

I nod before hanging up the phone. Once again, I request to go a little faster, which earns me an apologetic smile. Damn, I tried.

As promised, I’m there in ten minutes.

I bolt through the front entrance. Mom sees me run by the library and laughs cause she’s evil like that. I’m struggling here! I’m trying to appease my boyfriend and people are laughing at me! I demand a new...life? Family? I don’t know, something new.

The arcade doors open while Ariel quickly drags me inside. I nearly shout, but throw my hands over my mouth to stop myself from doing so. The girl giggles, then gives me a hug.

“It feels like forever since I’ve seen you,” she says.

“Yeah, sorry, I’m always busy.”

Langley, Cassidy, and Nora are next. The hugs and greetings are quick since, judging by Autumn’s panicked text, Quinton is ready to kill Dahlton. Dude needs to calm himself. Dahlton is a cool guy. He totally adores Autumn, but ok, if he hurts her I’ll kill him too, but the point is Quinton is way more mean about it than me. See, I’m not always the immature one. He has his moments.

Thankfully, Dahlton is spared because the doors open moments later to reveal a not at all surprised Quinton, giggling Autumn, and likely mentally scarred Dahlton.

“Surprise!” We all shout anyway while shooting some confetti that I howl at when it gets caught in Quinton’s hair. Oh, the sight of some pink and blue strings hanging from his hair and ears is priceless. May this day be blessed.

“Surprise?” Quinton asks. “For what?”

The room is silent but I save the day, as per usual, “Your convention! Yeah, you did so well and we’re here to congratulate you.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“Why must you always ruin the moment?”

“Pretty sure that’s your job.”

“Yeah right, you’re always the one with a stick up his ass!”

“Boys, boys, we know that you both have something up your ass, but it certainly isn’t a stick,” Autumn chimes in, causing everyone, save for Quinton and me, to laugh. Quinton rolls his eyes while I uselessly glare at everyone. “And please stop flirting so much. It’s making me gag.”

“But you don’t have a gag reflex, right, Dahlton?” I grin, not only because Autumn is slightly flustered, but also because Quinton glares pure hatred at Dahlton, who resembles a deer caught in headlights.

This is fun. I kinda understand why people wanna torment me. Not that I’m giving them permission nor am I ok with it, but like, I get it!

“No more dick jokes, please. Let us eat good food and have some fun. We rarely get to hang out,” Cassidy finally chimes in, looking about for everyone to agree. We all nod and the hugging continues from earlier.

I move over to Autumn and Dahlton while Quinton says hello to everyone else. He may act like he’s annoyed with us most of the time, but we can all see that small smile on his face. Yep, he loves us. There is no turning back. He is stuck with us for all eternity and, for once, I feel like I’m the evil demon, or maybe an angel, since this is a good thing?

“I’m so happy you could make it,” Autumn says with a relieved sigh. She grabs my hand and swings it between us. “What got you caught up, anyway? You weren’t supposed to have any plans today.”

“I guess the diplomats from France fancy me and wanted me to tag along for some of their visits in Gantia. I couldn’t say no. They’d just call me immature and complain. I left early, but we got stuck in a traffic jam.” I shrug while watching Quinton chat with Nora. He’s smiling, and it makes me smile too. “Sorry for nearly screwing this up, too.”

“Hey,” Dahlton calls, causing me to look at him. “It’s not your fault, and you made it. That’s what matters. Come on, let’s get something to eat. I’m starving!”

Dahlton speeds off, only stopping once when Quinton glares at him. Yeah, he waits for Quinton to get his food before he even steps near the table.

Autumn looks at me and I already know what she’s about to ask before she asks, “Are you nervous about Monday?”

“Of course I am. Quinton’s about to tour the lab of his dreams, get accepted that very day and, in a few months, move three hours away.”

“Please don’t be like that, Aron. Quinton will talk to you about it when he gets back tomorrow and, besides, you’ll make it work.”

“Everyone keeps saying that, but that doesn’t make me believe it anymore.” I pull my hand away to smack at my face a few times. Autumn watches with a mixture of amusement and concern. “Let’s not think about it. If I act too down, I’m worried Quinton will mess up his own future just to make me feel better.”

“Eh, I don’t know if he loves you *thaaaaaat* much.”

I’d argue, but true.

Laughing, Autumn runs off to see Dahlton, quickly taking his hand when she’s at his side. I gag when the two of them give each other loving looks. Man, they’re still in the puppy love stage. We’re all suffering because of that. Y’all gross, get a room!

It is fun hanging out with friends though. It feels like old times. I desperately miss that. I desperately miss a lot of what once was. We're eating dinner, chatting about our lives and what we've been up to, playing games and watching movies together. Since we don't always hang out as a group, there's a lot to say. Everyone has stories to tell, even Quinton.

He's gotten a lot better at socializing. Sometimes I'm jealous. A part of me loved being the only one Quinton really opened up to regularly, but when I see him laughing with everyone, throwing a joke or smiling, it just makes me relieved. I don't know how to explain it. I'm happy, simple as that.

So it's not that surprising when, later that evening after everyone leaves, Quinton and I return to our room and he asks, "What?"

"What, what?" I ask, staring at the man that's facing me with a cocked brow.

"Your face."

"Is amazing? I know."

Quinton rolls his eyes. "You're giving me a look."

"A look?" I touch my face like that's meant to tell me what sort of look I'm apparently making. Obviously it doesn't, so I'm more confused. "Do explain, Quinny."

"Nevermind."

Quinton heads over to the dresser. He removes his shirt to toss it in the hamper, then does the same with his jeans, replacing them with a comfy pair of sweats that hang loosely to his hips. Without really thinking about it, I walk over and wrap my arms around his waist. He's warm and smells faintly of cologne mixed with uniquely Quinton.

He glances back at me when I press my forehead against his back. “What are you doing?” He asks.

“Hugging you.”

“Why?”

“I need a reason?”

Quinton hums. He doesn’t push me away or tries to move. It makes me smile.

“Did you have fun today?” I ask. I hate that my voice is shaking a little. I don’t know why I’m asking either. Obviously, he had fun. He was smiling and laughing the whole time.

“Fun is pushing it.”

“Bitch, please.”

“Why do you ask?”

“You’re asking a lot of questions today.”

“You aren’t giving many answers.”

Sighing, I drop my hands and step back. It’s almost pathetic how cold I suddenly feel. “I just wanted to know if you had fun today because... lately…”

Quinton faces me. I lower my gaze. His breath brushes against my face.

“Lately?” He asks.

I’m supposed to make up some excuse like we haven’t seen our friends lately or even be partially honest and admit that we haven’t had a lot of time together either, but nothing comes out. Instead, I stand there awkwardly, wondering what Quinton is thinking or how he’s feeling. I’m too scared to look at him, though, which changes the moment he speaks.

“I know this was your apology for missing my convention,” Quinton says, causing me to look at him with wide eyes. He’s not smirking, though he

doesn’t look angry either. “You don’t have to apologize anymore, but either way, the party was fun.”

My lips twitch back into a smile while Quinton reaches out. I’m a bit surprised when his hand rests on my cheek, caressing it for only a second before I blush. It’s not like we aren’t touchy, well, maybe not as much as others, but Quinton isn’t always the gentle touch kind of guy, so I’m left a little speechless. Happy but speechless.

Quinton drops his hand then walks towards our bed while saying jokingly, “Next time, don’t have Autumn and Dahlton stall me so you can get here, though. You know Dahlton annoys the shit out of me.”

My stomach drops. Although he was clearly joking, I feel like I’ve failed. He knew I was late? The whole time he knew but never brought it up? He knew they were stalling and that, once again, I was late to a planned surprise for him.

Quinton doesn’t come across as mad about that either. He doesn’t even say much, yet it stings. I feel like I’ve failed him yet again, and he’s acting like it’s all ok because he’s used to it and accepted it. I should say something. Come on, say something, anything…

But I don’t.

“I’m gonna get a shower,” I announce with my back facing him.

Quinton hums in response, unaware of my inner turmoil, which I plan to keep that way. I rush into our connected bathroom, quickly shutting the door behind me. The moment I do, I slip to the floor, bring my legs up to my chest, and bury my face against my knees.

I feel sick, sick and stupid and like such a fucking loser. I shouldn’t though. I know I shouldn’t because, like Dahlton said, I made it. I came to

the party. I spent time with all of them, so why am I feeling like such a dumbass?

There's all this guilt eating away at me, then fear. Fear that this will keep happening and I'll keep screwing up. One day, Quinton won't be ok with it anymore. He'll no longer understand and I'll be all alone. He'll leave me to find someone better. Honestly, anyone is better than me at this point. That scares me, so much so that I don't want to admit how much it actually does. The power he holds over me is scary.

And there's nothing I can do about it because I'm the prince, the future king. Running away from my responsibilities is not something I'm capable of, Quinton knows this because he's the same. I admit, sometimes I think about it. Sometimes I consider giving up the throne and ending our story like some cheesy movie by running off into the sunset.

Until reality hits me and I realize that life doesn't work that way for anyone. Running away from your problems isn't solving them, it's just pushing them aside for another day. They'll always come back to bite you.

It's hard for me to breathe. The bathroom is too small. I heave a long breath to steady my breathing.

Sighing, I sit up and lean my head against the door. There's no point in even talking about it, either. Every time we do, it ends up the same. We can't do anything about it, we just gotta work through it, but it's so damn hard and I'm tired of always being the failure.

How am I meant to talk to Quinton about marriage when I'm freaking out already? Not that I planned to tonight, but like, I should bring it up after the whole discussion with Dad the other day.

We should know if we're on the same page, right? Even if marriage won't happen now, do we both want or see that in our future? And what about the

council? Oh boy, they will have a field day should there even be a hint to us getting engaged, affianced, betrothed! I can already hear them now; belittling everything Quinton and I ever do. They'll start problems simply because they can. Not that they don't do that already.

Is that what Quinton wants, though? He's already given up so much, having a normal life. That's out of the picture with me. I've always struggled with it. Hell, it's one of the big reasons I was at his throat in high school. How will Quinton continue to handle it? More importantly, does he even want to?

Wow, I'm already exhausted. Is it ok to always be this tired at the mere age of 21? I'mma drop dead by forty at this rate! I still haven't decided if I wanna be cremated or buried! Probably cremated, I don't wanna come back as a zombie when some psycho finally discovers the virus. And that psycho will probably be Quinton since we all know he wants to end the world.

Wait, I was having a serious discussion with myself. What the hell, Aron? Keep on track!

"Ok, chill out," I hiss to myself while furiously ruffling my hair. "Just take a breath. You got this. You got this."

I tell myself that, but I honestly don't believe it.

Stepping out of the bathroom after a nice relaxing shower, I find Quinton sitting on our bed reading a book. The TV is already on and set on a superhero movie that Quinton knows I love. His dark gaze rises to land on me upon realizing I'm out and, the moment he sees me, he scowls.

"Do you ever properly dry your hair?"

"I'm drying it right now! Look!" I reach up to push the towel I have around my neck onto my head. While walking, I roughly tussle my hair about causing a few droplets of water to fly everywhere. I sit on the bed,

ready to continue the assault, when Quinton suddenly leans over. I hate that I still blush when he's so close.

"Keep that up and you'll go bald," Quinton says while smacking my hands away.

Thankfully, the towel hides my blush while he gently massages my scalp. I want to say I'm not a child and he should stop, but I have a superb view of his abs from here though, so it's a win-win situation.

"I won't go bald," I mumble and continue to admire the view that I should be tired of by now, but I'm really, really not. Fuck, why is he so ridiculously attractive? It isn't fair. There should be some sort of law against being smart and hot. Should I make one? I'll have the power one day!

That's it. I'm making one. Don't know how it'll work, but it'll happen.

"If you do, I'm breaking up with you," he says.

"Implying that you plan to stay with me for that long?"

Quinton suddenly stops. A lump forms in my throat because of his silence. Why isn't he saying anything? Did I ask a weird question? I said it teasingly, but he seems to have taken it seriously! Shit, I'm an idiot! Mouth, why do you always get me into trouble?!

Before I can try to save myself, Quinton moves. I'm too nervous about what he's about to say, or do, to speak. Feeling his hands move from my head to my cheeks causing said cheeks to burst with color makes me think that, somehow, I said something right. Quinton gently pushes me to look up to meet his weirdly comforting brown eyes before moving in to crash his lips against mine in a heated kiss. I'm useless the moment he does so, immediately leaning into the kiss that's hungry from the start.

We shall not discuss how he so easily turns me into a pile of useless goo. I'm proud to say that I have turned him on enough to know that he is as

utterly useless in my grasp. I'm just more obvious about it.

The towel slips away when Quinton pushes me back. He's leaning over me, his legs on either side of my hips while his lips are locked with my own.

Damn, we haven't really had time to ourselves and my body is on fire with need. I reach out to wrap my arms around his waist, immediately feeling his warm skin beneath my fingertips. A moan escapes me when Quinton's tongue continuously swipes my own. Then his chest rests against mine and our hips meld together while he moves to kiss down my throat.

Since I have the ability to speak, I kind of dig my own grave by saying, "Judging by your response, I'm going to take that as a yes."

The moment Quinton bites my collarbone in retaliation, I know I'm in for a long, but totally worth it, evening.

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CHAPTER FIVE

I have a so-called day-off. The sun shines. Birds sing. All is right in the world and, yes, maybe my chipper mood has to do with getting laid last night, but that is beside the point.

I'm happy. I'm happy waking up to Quinton asleep in our bed, completely curled up around me; his personal teddy bear. I'm happy to be that personal teddy bear. I'm happy that we have this day to ourselves, and I'm more than happy to kiss Quinton awake. Does he give me a glare worthy of pissing my pants? Yes, absolutely, but I kiss him again because he hates getting woken up and morning kisses, so obviously I constantly do both!

"Brush your teeth," he orders. "You stink."

"Why does morning breath gross you out when you were eating m—"

Quinton squeezes his arms around my waist so tight that someone should change his species to a boa constrictor 'cause fuck!

“Ok, ok, I can’t breathe, can’t breathe!” I kick about until he releases me, then quickly rolls out of bed. I peek over the mattress to find Quinton rolling over and throwing the blankets over his head. That’s his way of telling me to fuck off, and I oblige, for now.

My stomach growls. After dressing myself, brushing my teeth and making sure Mom can’t find any hickey’s—cause she still goes all mother mode when she sees them—I head downstairs to get myself some breakfast. Mom and Dad are down there in their robes and are surprised to see me merrily walking through the door.

“Someone’s chipper this morning,” Mom says.

I kiss her cheek, then move onto Dad.

“He got laid.” And Dad is smacked instantly. “Ow! What? Look at that face!”

“We are eating breakfast! That is not a discussion to have over a meal!”

Dad sticks his tongue out, then sends me a wink while I choose not to respond to that. Why can she discuss how she met Dad, then talk about my freaking conception, yet I can’t mention anything about sex? Mothers are so weird!

Clearing my throat, I say good morning to them and ask, “I don’t have any plans today, right?”

“Nope. Not one,” Dad says, then frowns. “I am sorry about yesterday, Aron. I know you need some time off, and I was hoping you could get that.”

“It’s ok. I got here in time for the party.”

“How was it? Did you all have fun?” Mom inquires and I tell her about our time.

Not long later, Quinton joins us. Even after all these years, I can’t help but find it funny how laid back he’s gotten with my parents. His hair is a mess,

and he’s in a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, which he was against doing very often when he first started coming around. Now he has no issue looking half asleep or like a mindless zombie in the mornings, like the rest of the human race.

“Good morning, sweetie!” Mom calls, gesturing for Quinton to come over for a kiss, which he does without question now. He gives Dad one too, and I totally love it. Not because I want to tease Quinton for it, but because I think it proves to him he is part of the family. He has us and my parents won’t let him forget that. I sure as hell won’t either.

“Do the two of you have plans today?” Mom asks, looking between Quinton and me while we eat our breakfast that the maids bring out. She’s beaming brightly, so much so that my spidey senses are tingley.

I look at Quinton anyway, who shrugs.

“Not really,” I answer. That’s because I never really make plans since they normally fall through.

“Well, you two should go out, do something fun today together.”

“Like what?” I ask, considering we can’t just go to the movies. There are a few places around the palace we can get away with going to since they’re more high end, basically for celebrities, but they aren’t really normal date material.

“Excellent question!” She shouts.

See, I knew my spidey senses were tingling for a reason. Now even Quinton is giving her a confused look, although Mom is used to the expressions by now and says nothing of them.

“Since it’s getting cold, the parks are shutting down. However, I got special permission for the two of you to go before the park officially closes!” Mom pulls two amusement park tickets out of her robe pocket and

hands them over. Quinton takes them first, eyeing the pieces of paper like he doesn't believe they're real. "All the rides will be open, some of the food stalls and games won't be, but there are no lines and you can spend the whole day having fun! Isn't that great?"

I'm all for amusement parks, so I look at Quinton with a wide and hopeful grin. For a moment, it seems like he's going to say no. His eyes narrow on me, then my mom, then back to me, but with a shrug, he hands me the tickets and says, "We have nothing better to do."

I snatch the tickets from the buzz kill. "Shut up, it's gonna be fun and you know it!"

After breakfast is over, I rush to our room to change. I don't know why, seeing as, like Mom said, there won't be any lines. We probably can ride every single ride before the day ends. That just means we should go soon enough to ride each one twice. Yes, yes, excellent idea. I have great ideas, the best!

I'm digging through my dresser, throwing clothes all over the room when Quinton says, "Idiot, you're making a mess."

"Sorry, Mom, I'll clean it up in a second."

I can envision him rolling his eyes. When I find something I think will be comfortable to wear while walking about a park all day, I spin around and find that Quinton has not only found his clothes but also changed into them. I scowl.

"Show off."

"How is getting dressed being a showoff?" Quinton smirks.

"With you, it just is."

"Hurry up. Cora probably already has the car ready."

Yeah, I can’t argue with that because, honestly, she probably does. I swear she’s more excited about us going out than we are. Well, Quinton doesn’t show his excitement, though judging by how quick he leaves the room he’s totally excited. He can act all cool, like an amusement park isn’t really his style, but screw it, it is. There’s no use hiding the truth. Just admit it!

I’m quick to change and run down the steps to find Quinton waiting outside. Mom wishes us a good time before we hop into the car and take our twenty-minute drive to the park. I’m jittery the whole time, which earns me a few glares from Quinton. Each one has me sticking my tongue out until he smacks it with the back of his book. I yelp and cover my mouth in shock. Quinton smirks, continuing to read like he didn’t just assault me with a book.

“That was my tongue,” I say. Quinton hums. “You whacked my tongue with a book.”

“I’ll have to burn this book after you buy me a new one.”

“Me? You’re the one that hit me with it!”

“You were being annoying.”

“Like you aren’t used to it.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t let you know.”

I pout and say, “You can do that without hitting me.”

Quinton shrugs.

“You wanted to go, right?” I ask, changing the subject even though it’s a bit too late, seeing as we’re on our way.

Quinton raises a brow. “Why wouldn’t I want to go?”

“You didn’t seem as excited as me.”

“No one is excited by anything as much as you are.”

“You know, I think you meant that as an insult, but I’m taking it as a compliment.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Princess.”

Chuckling, I lean against him, then rest my head on his shoulder. Quinton moves, but only to make both of us more comfortable. I say nothing about it while he acts like he never even did it.

Smiling, I say, “At least we get to go out today. We don’t get to do something like this very often.”

Quinton hums.

“Does that bother you?”

And Quinton is giving me the look, the one that says stop asking because we’ve discussed this before. I am a professional Quinton reader now. He has yet to give me an award for it though, ain’t that rude?

“I already told you I don’t get the need to constantly go out. Every once in a while is fine, but some people are ridiculously excessive. I’d rather be at home,” he declares.

“So we can be together in private?” I grin at the glare he sends me for my suggestive tone. Please, he can’t argue against that. And he doesn’t because he knows I’m right. Uh huh, I won this time. You bet this will go down in history.

Quinton ignores me for the rest of the ride. What a rude sack of shit.

As promised, the park is closed off to others. When we arrive, the gates are sealed up and only opened for us, as well as the guards. I’ve already told them to go ahead and get on the rides, but who knows if they’ll actually go through with it? Quinton looks a bit out of place when we step in because he claimed that an empty park or fair comes off as a bad horror movie,

which is understandable since he grew up accustomed to them being packed.

Doesn’t matter though, we’re getting on the first ride I see, which is the Sky Drop. Quinton has no say in the matter. I’m already pulling him onto the platform. We sit down, buckle the seat belts, and the ride is sent up before plummeting without warning to the ground. I scream. My stomach tickles and even Quinton grins. We stay on the ride for a total of four drops before finally jumping off. The last time we came to an amusement park was... the year before last year? No, shit, it was the year before the year before last year. What am I saying?

The fact that it’s been so long makes me feel awful. Thinking over it, usually the dates I have with Quinton are hitting up fancy restaurants, beaches, and hotels, which are obviously all great. However, having a normal date where we do what everyone else does is always on my to do list. I guess this isn’t completely normal, but it’s close enough!

So I make sure to have a blast. Quinton and I move from one ride to another, typically riding them multiple times cause we can. At first, I’m tugging us along with a mission to ride everything. After about four rides, Quinton doesn’t let me pull him anymore. I look back in confusion until I feel his fingers intertwine with mine. The touch sends a wave of warmth up my arm and straight into my chest.

“Slow down,” he says, trying to sound smug, though I swear it never holds as much bite as it used to. “We have all day, idiot.”

I know he’s right. Normally that wouldn’t be what stops me, but when we walk side by side while hand in hand, I get it. I get why we’re taking it slow because it feels so damn good to have his hand in mine, to feel our shoulders brush while we partake in conversation. It’s not even about

anything spectacular. We talk about the rides, the weather, our friends and even school work. Then we get to the next ride, stay on it a few times in a row, and continue on our normal date like normal people. At least as normal as we can get.

Makes me want to do this more. Makes me want to hold his hand in public with the same confidence as I have now. Also kind of makes me hate myself for not doing it. Didn't I say I wouldn't let others control my life anymore? What happened to teenage Aron? I kind of need him back because now—now I feel so anxious. Always anxious, fearful, a ball of strangled nerves. Everyone's eyes are on me. The eyes of the country are on me, waiting to strike the moment I show weakness. It was hard being a prince before, but now it's hard just being me. Sometimes, though, I don't think I'm being me at all.

"Who do you think even invented roller coasters?" I end up asking to help my quickly falling mood. "Cause, whoever they are, I hope heaven exists for them and that they're there."

"LaMarcus Adna Thompson."

"Hah?"

"LaMarcus Adna Thompson. Actually, he got one of the first patents for a roller coaster design in 1885." Quinton tilts his head to the side. "Or was it '84?"

"The fact that you know that infuriates me."

"You asked."

"I didn't expect you to answer. How and why do you even know that?" I holler, swinging my unoccupied hand in the air. My other hand is busy clutching onto Quinton's because, apparently, even while he pisses me off, I

have to hold his hand. What the fuck, heart? Why you gotta play me like this?

“I’m not an idiot,” he says.

“That is not a well-known fact!”

Quinton shrugs. He’s smirking like the bastard that he is. I need to learn to stop asking questions because he either knows the answer or finds out eventually just to piss me off. Where does he even store all that information? How has his head not exploded? It’s hard enough for me to remember anything concerning politics, let alone everything else!

“Let’s go. I’m hungry,” Quinton says while pulling me towards one of the open food stalls. It is a little past noon so I’m surprised my stomach isn’t—Ah, there it is.

Quinton snorts at the loud grumbling that my stomach made. I swear it sounds like a bear lives inside me. That’s how loud it is. Doesn’t matter though, we get our food moments later and sit at one of the tables in front of it. Quinton munches on some chicken strips while I stuff a burger in my mouth.

Our day is going so well and Quinton’s in such a good mood that I feel now is the best time to talk. The only issue is I do not know how to bring up what I’ve been thinking about because blurting out, hey, you ever think about getting married, seems too blunt, even for me. At the same time, I feel it’s totally normal to ask your partner how they feel about the future, such as marriage or even kids, right? So it’s not weird and I’m not crazy for considering it, especially since we’re asked about it more and more these days.

Desperately, I try to think of a way to smoothly bring it up. I’m not good with smooth. Hell, the reason Quinton and I kissed was because I was

yelling at him so, yeah, I’m as smooth as crunchy peanut butter.

Screw it. Let’s go full Aron style and wing this shit!

“I got interviewed by Gateway News the other day,” I blurt out, hoping Quinton saw said interview. He normally does. I find it both sweet and nerve-wracking that he tries to watch or read whatever I’ve been in, then tease me about it later.

“I saw,” he replies, causing my throat to go dry. I grab my drink and chug half of it, earning me a raised brow from Quinton.

“Did... did any of my answers bother you?”

That confuses him more. “No.”

“Ah, that’s... that’s good.”

Damn it, I wasn’t supposed to say that. I’m supposed to lead the conversation onwards to ask how he wants me to reply to the marriage question or... or something.

“What is it?” Quinton asks, sitting his food in the basket while giving me a cut the shit look. Seriously, he’s too good at speaking with his expressions.

“What is what?”

“You brought up the interview for a reason and if I don’t answer your unasked question, you’ll be thinking about it all day. I’m not willing to put up with one of your mental freak outs today.”

“I don’t have mental freak outs!”

Oh, the cut the shit look intensifies. He should win an award for that.

Ok, ok, fine, he’s right. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. If I don’t ask, I’ll keep thinking about it. I hate to admit it, but yes, I totally freak out on my own for a while and we are having fun today so I don’t wanna ruin it. But if

I ask and the question upsets him, then I'll still ruin it, so this could be a losing situation either way.

Grumbling, I look down and start picking at the end of the wrapping in my food basket. The pieces are being torn apart or folded up in my hands when I speak, "So we... we both get asked a lot about our relationship during interviews and shows and stuff. I think we both handle them pretty well, and like, y'know, avoid revealing too much, but typically we end up on the rather big question of... marriage."

I can't bear to look at Quinton, not even when he hums. Well, that must mean to go on, so that's what I do.

"We've always avoided answering or kinda beat around the bush, but lately I'm being asked more. Do we plan to get married? What will your title be? Are there possibilities for kids in the future? A-And I'm starting to feel that by evading the question it's making it seem like I don't want to marry you, which, I, well, it's kinda, that answer is a little…"

Damn, is it getting hot out here or is it just me?

I reach up to pull my suddenly tight shirt from around my neck. The lump in my throat has worsened, so I try to drink it away. Doesn't work, and I'm left stumbling over my words even more.

"I-I'm not saying I want to get married, or no, maybe I am. I don't really know. What I'm saying is I hope my answers don't come across as rude or, like, I'm not hopelessly in love with you. D-Don't even tease me about that, either. This is a serious, very serious discussion!" I point accusingly at Quinton who, surprisingly, watches me with undivided attention. The feel of his eyes so fixated on me sends a shiver down my spine, one that worsens when I realize he isn't laughing.

He’s smiling. Just smiling. This soft and warm and totally heart-melting smile that’s so small others would have trouble seeing it, but I see it plain as day and I don’t know how to take it. I don’t think I can.

“I... what I’m saying is that we should talk about this, so I stop freaking out and know what to say. We’re still young so marriage might not be something we’re ready for or ever will be, but I... I think we need to figure out if we’re on the same page, like, if that’s s-something we envision as our future and if it’s what we want or not. Fuck, I don’t know!” I finally shout, throwing my hands in the air before slamming my head against the table.

Ouch. That hurt.

But my head is already pounding from that absolutely piss poor excuse of a question? Rant? What the hell even was that? Did Quinton understand? Because there’s no way I can repeat any of that or phrase it any better. My heart’s beating a mile a minute and I’m gonna drop dead, so yeah, it’s been a good life. I’ve had fun. Remember me, R.I.P.

“That was possibly the dumbest thing you’ve ever said.”

I growl and look up to find Quinton thoroughly amused. His elbow rests on the table to allow his head to be propped up by his hand. The look he’s giving me, though, it’s warm, as warm as the smile he showed earlier. Even if he said it was dumb, I feel that it meant more to him than he’s willing to admit.

“Don’t make me feel worse, asshole. I already know it was bad,” I mumble, sitting up and trying to avoid eye contact.

“Marriage was never something I considered.”

My heart twists painfully until I look at Quinton and realize he has more to say.

“Even when I was with Autumn, marriage seemed like more of an obligation than a want. But I honestly felt there was no one else out there willing to marry me, considering who my dad is.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. You’re an asshole, but you’re not so bad. I’m sure someone would have fallen for you eventually,” I say, smirking.

Quinton rolls his eyes. “Regardless, I figured it’d never happen, so I never really thought about it, but now it’s quite different... I’d like to get married.”

Maybe it’s my heart speaking, but I swear he said “to you” without having even said it.

Damn it, I’m bad. I’m hearing him speak to me with his eyes. Something is wrong! Still, hearing him admit to wanting to get married suddenly makes this seem all too real because it truly is a possibility. That thought hits me hard; Quinton and I could get married. Marriage never felt real until now, and I don’t know if I’m scared or excited.

Clearing my throat, I try not to think about it and reply, “Me too. I’ve always wanted to, though. My parents have such a good marriage and I always wanted one like it.”

“What about kids?”

“I never thought about it when I was younger, but recently I’ve thought that I want kids. Seeing more people with a growing family must have gotten to me,” I laugh while nervously scratching at the back of my neck, which feels insanely hot. I know I’m blushing up to my ears, but I’m going to say it’s fine considering the topic. “I’d send my kid to school with everyone else, though, so they don’t turn out like... well, like me.”

“What’s wrong with turning out like you?” Quinton asks so quickly that the question actually stumps me. I’m shocked he asked because he should know best.

“You realize that our initial conversation was an argument over a chair because I was being an ass, right?” I laugh. “I was a complete dick, still kind of am, but definitely worse then.”

“We were fifteen, and I purposefully pissed you off just as much as you did me,” Quinton argues, causing me to fall silent. Judging by his expression, he’s a bit annoyed. “People can’t expect everyone to be perfect all the time. We make mistakes and grow up. That doesn’t stop after you’re a teenager, either. Ten years from now, we’ll look back on these moments and think we were idiots or complete assholes, then twenty years, thirty and so on. If someone doesn’t understand that, then they aren’t the type of person you want to have around.”

“Wow, you should write notes for fortune cookies with sayings like that.”

Quinton shakes his head while I smile. I can’t lie and say that didn’t make me feel better. However, if I could avoid my possible future kid from being as big of an ass as me, then that’d be great.

“What about you?” I ask, curious about Quinton’s answer since he seems fine with kids. He isn’t super playful or enthusiastic when one is around, but he generally seems to enjoy their presence.

“I don’t want a big family, two kids at the absolute most.”

That sounds like Quinton. I can’t imagine him being a father to five. Pretty sure his annoyed meter would explode along with his head. Then it hits me; we really are on the same page in every department. We both would like to get married and have a small family, which just intensifies the feelings building in my gut. We really could get married, have kids, and grow old together, like in the movies. The mere thought of that makes my heart do backflips in ways that cannot be healthy.

“I don’t get why these questions were such a big deal,” Quinton suddenly says while continuing to eat his meal. “Most people talk about this.”

“I didn’t see you bringing it up.”

“Figured it’d freak you out if I did.”

Wait a damn minute.

“Meaning you wanted to discuss this with me because you see it as a possible future for us?” I tease, grinning from ear to ear when Quinton actually hesitates to eat his food. He’s quick to recover, but I totally saw that. “Aw, Quinny, do you wanna marry me?”

“I’d rather die.”

“I think you’re lying.”

“I think if you keep annoying me, some rather unpleasant bacteria will go missing from my lab and end up in you. Who knows what that will do.”

Well, that’s a new threat that I’m not willing to bet on, so with a concerned smile, I eat my food in silence. Quinton does the same, though even through the silence, the air between us is warm. There’s almost a sweet smell in the air. My heart won’t stop racing. My cheeks won’t cool down. I pop some ice cubes into my mouth, hoping to help. I feel like I’m on cloud nine, although all we did was talk about it.

But Dad is right, marriage is commitment. It’s a big deal, we can’t take it lightly, so I’m glad we talked. Whether either of us is ready for the next step is beyond me. Honestly, I don’t know if anyone ever really is. It’s kind of one of those things that you have to prepare yourself the best you can, but realize that it’s never enough and just go for it. I don’t know when our Go For It Moment will arrive, if ever, but if it does, I already know what my answer will be. Something tells me, so does Quinton.

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CHAPTER SIX

“You and Quinton discussed marriage and kids? I’m sorry, are we in the upside down world or something?”

I smack Langley with my notebook, causing him to hiss in a mixture of pain and amusement. Rubbing his sore head, he snickers and says, “Ok, ok, in all seriousness, that’s great. I will prepare my tux as your best man. Can’t wait to hear the wedding announcement in the next few months.”

“Keep your voice down,” I grumble, seeing as we’re on campus.

Right now we’re sitting alone outside to enjoy the slowly turning to fall weather. People continue to keep a distance from me, but if someone overhears us, the news will make up some lie that we’re already engaged. I can only imagine what all the politicians will say, the old wind bags!

“And I doubt it will happen soon... or at all!” I quickly tack on.

Langley looks ready to argue, but it seems he knows not to even bother and asks, “If Quinton already had answers, it means he thought about it,

right?”

Well, yeah, even I teased him about that, but I don’t see Langley’s point.

“That means he had similar thoughts to yours already and has accepted what outcome he’d like from your relationship. I’m not saying he’s gonna pop the question tomorrow, but don’t be surprised if he gets down to do something other than suck your—”

I kick Langley in the shin to shut him up. The boy yelps, says something about abuse, but goes quiet when I say, “You’re overthinking it. He always has his life planned out, so of course he’d have an answer. That doesn’t mean he, or I, am ready for it. We talked about it, that’s all!”

“And it leads to the question because now you both know that it’s something you want. Besides, why are you getting all freaked out? You two have been together forever. You live together, he attends boring political get-togethers with you. If that isn’t future husband material, then I don’t know what is.”

“What about you and Ariel?” I ask because my friends all seem to have such healthy and successful relationships. Langley and Ariel have been going strong longer than Quinton and me, so it feels best to ask him.

“Have we talked about it? Of course,” Langley answers. “We don’t want to get married until after we’ve finished college and start our jobs, though. We plan to find a place together first too, try to see how we work with our money together, so I won’t be asking any time soon, but I definitely plan to.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It’s not easy or hard. It’s just realizing that communication is key. You may get embarrassed or worried about how your partner will feel but you need to know the answer and, even after you do, it’s hella scary to think

about.” Langley shivers. “I keep thinking that no matter how much I plan, I’ll screw up the proposal. I want it to be something she’ll remember for the rest of her life, something we can tell our kids about when they’re older and feel just as giddy talking about it.”

“That is both disgusting and adorable.” I laugh, smiling at the loving glint in Langley’s eye. He blushes, seeming to have realized he was gushing. Too late, he already said it.

“Whatever, my point is it’s great you talked about it.”

“Feels weird, like I’ve suddenly become a grownup.”

“Dude, you’re gonna be 22 in a few months.”

“I know. I feel ancient.”

Langley cackles. “I dare you to say that in front of your parents.”

“Never. I like living, thanks.”

“I’m surprised this is what we’re talking about instead of Quinton’s visit to Northview today,” Langley says. His eyes widen from the immediate drop in my mood. “Oh, were we going to pretend like that wasn’t happening?”

“No. Maybe. Yes.” I groan, then cross my arms on the table and press my chin on my arms. Langley is giving me an apologetic smile. “I feel like an ass for being so worried about it.”

“It is a long distance, but Quinton said he could make his own schedule.”

That’s what he said to make me feel better. It didn’t work with Quinton, so it obviously doesn’t work with Langley.

“I know, but it always feels like he’s working more than I am and that’s not ok, but I don’t know what to do!” I sit up and throw my arms through the air. People don’t even stare at me when I do it anymore.

“Well, Quinton is the one that really can fix his schedule. You’re meeting diplomats, going to U.N. meetings, helping your father with laws and regulations. You’re going to be king,” Langley says with an almost hesitant shrug. I can see where he’s coming from and understand what he’s saying, but it still bothers me. I want to be able to make more time for Quinton because he deserves it, even if he’s a total bastard.

“And that’s why I’m worried about the,” I look around like I expect someone to be listening but find no one. “The marriage thing. What if we get married, then he gets fed up with all this shit? Or what if he gets fed up with it now? I doubt he can stay with me forever.”

“Quinton’s pretty stubborn. It would take a lot to change his mind,” Langley answers with a firm nod. “I thought you two said you already talked about all that.”

“We did, but nothing has changed. He never complains about it and that worries me because he should complain. It fucking sucks!”

Langley frowns.

I know he doesn’t have much to say in order to comfort me. We’ve gone over this before. It’s nice to rant to someone. Langley is always trying his best to be supportive and, although he repeats what everyone else has said, I at least feel well enough to continue on through my classes for the rest of the day. I get out fairly early now, about ten till two, so I check my phone to see if I have anything from Quinton.

The answer is a big fat no. He must still be touring the lab. Probably won’t be home until late this evening. My gut twists at the thought of it. That may be a recurring theme with us should he get into the grad school of his dreams.

What kind of piece of shit boyfriend actually kind of hopes their partner doesn't get accepted into their dream grad school? I want to punch myself in the face for being such an ass. Obviously, I do no such thing. As if I'd harm this beautiful mug of mine!

Suddenly, my guard, Andy, shoves me. I stumble over my feet, nearly tripping if not for his hand gripping my shirt. I realize why he pushed me when an egg splats on the ground in front of me. Looking across the street, there's a college kid with his hood up.

"The Corallines will take the throne before a fag like you ever sits on it!" The stranger shouts.

I frown. My chest tightens. I can't help but to recall that being said before, being written about in papers, either obviously homophobic or unintended. My gut twists. Really? Will it ever stop? I'm exhausted just thinking about it.

I look away just as the stranger runs off with his tail between his legs. Andy gestures for my guards to follow, though I'm quick to interject, "Don't bother."

They all look at me.

"He isn't worth our time, just some dumb ass."

"That we know of," Andy argues with a furrowed brow. "We should at least make sure he doesn't have anything on him."

Frowning, I give the go ahead because, well; he tried to throw an egg at me. While two guards chase after him, I shout, "Don't tackle him or anything, ok! Be gentle!"

Because the last thing I need is the press talking about how my guard's body slammed a kid. I say kid like we aren't likely around the same age. I just feel a lot older. Sighing, Andy and I continue on our way home.

Comments like that don’t bother me as much as they used to, but they’re still incredibly annoying and always there. Once I gave my oh so grand speech in high school, my sexuality has been talk of the press. Not so much now as it once was, but boy, it’s still brought up during the stupidest of times. The Corallines certainly don’t help. Neither of them has an issue pointing out how improper and immoral they find having me as the future king is. Although they’ve never officially tried to kick my father from the throne, it’s certainly been brought up by others. Our relationship with them has worsened and they never come over anymore unless absolutely necessary. When they see me, I get the stink eye, but I make sure to give it right back.

I felt bad, though. There’s always this thought that if I was different, if I was straight, then there wouldn’t be that sort of talk at all. I’d grow up to be a mature king, marry a woman, and have kids like I was supposed to. My parents wouldn’t have to defend me, nor would I or Quinton, but then I wouldn’t have Quinton. Then I feel bad about feeling bad. It’s an endless cycle.

When I return home, I help Dad with some paperwork. I’ve been doing that a lot lately, even if Dad says I don’t have to. But I feel that I have to. I need to get better, do better, so that any time someone questions whether I’ll make a good king or not, the resounding answer will be yes. Get the practice in now, so when it’s my job entirely, I can work through it on my own. It’s boring as hell, that has never changed, but being with Dad makes it doable. We have a lot of laughs until I get a text from Mom informing me that Quinton’s home and, sure enough, it’s late. It’s almost eleven o’clock.

“Get some sleep, Dad,” I say while standing at the desk. Dad peers at me from behind his glasses. “It’s late.”

“I’m almost done. Have your mom come yell at me in fifteen minutes.”

I nod and inform Mom through text of her duty. She says she’ll yell at him in five.

Rushing to our room, I find Quinton at his desk, pushing some papers into a folder. He sits it aside when the door opens and looks back to find me in the doorway. I smile immediately, then mentally smack myself for doing so.

Please, self, be less obvious. For my own sanity.

“How’d it go?” I ask nervously.

“Fine,” Quinton answers, turning to face me, then leaning against the desk. His hands grip the edges while he holds himself up.

“Did you get a tour of the lab? Did you like it?”

“Yes, I saw all of it. It’s an excellent campus.”

I can’t help but feel Quinton’s responses are lackluster. He’s not one to brag or get excited easily, but when it comes to something he enjoys—like his nerdy science projects—he’s like every other human being. Even he says more than a sentence, especially considering he’s gone on and on about wanting to attend Northview the last, like, two years. Right now, I feel that isn’t the case.

“It sounds like you didn’t like it all that much,” I say.

“I didn’t say that,” he argues.

“You didn’t need to.” I step over to him, leaning forward to inspect his face because, well, I don’t know why. It’s a pleasant view? I thought it’d tell me something? I don’t know and I’m not bothering to come up with a response.

“You’ve been considering Northview for a while now. You’ve done so much research, have visited the campus before and liked it enough to say no to Greenly, so what changed?” I ask.

Quinton sighs like this conversation takes a toll on him. Whatever, he didn't honestly think he could come home and not talk to me about his trip. I've been freaking out about it since he told me. This bastard should have had his answers written on note cards and memorized by now!

"It's not that I didn't like it, it's just that I found it to be similar to Monroeville," Quinton explains, which isn't really an explanation because what the hell is this Monroeville? Another fancy grad school?

I swear Quinton reads minds because he rolls his eyes and says, "The college nearby has the same program as Greenly, similar lab and opportunities as both Greenly and Northview, but I thought Northview would be more advanced. It's not so I'm split on which to attend."

"Oh... really?"

I stare at Quinton for an answer. I don't know why, because he just fucking explained it, but hey, I don't always make sense. Quinton ends up whacking me over the back of the head. I yelp and rub my poor, abused head while growling, "What the hell was that for?"

"For being an idiot."

"I am not! I'm just shocked since you've done so much research. I thought you'd already know which grad school you wanted to go to by now."

Quinton brushes past me, his shoulder hitting against mine. When we were in high school, I would have taken that as a sign of him being an ass. Now I know it's an excuse to touch without him having to make it obvious he wants attention. I roll my eyes and walk after him, quickly wrapping my arms around his waist from behind. He can act annoyed, but I know he loves it because he doesn't walk away.

"What is with the back hugs lately? Are you a kid?" Quinton grunts.

“You love them.”

“It’s too hot.”

“It’s almost winter. You even asked to turn the heat up yesterday.”

“That was yesterday. This is today.”

“Congratulations, you’re a genius!”

Quinton shoves me away, causing me to laugh. I’m about to tease him more when he suddenly says, “Andy told me someone tried to egg you today.”

“Huh?”

Quinton looks at me from over his shoulder while he grabs a change of clothes. He steps away from the dresser with a pair of boxers, some sweats and a long-sleeved shirt in his hand.

“At school,” he elaborates.

“Oh, yeah.” I can’t believe I almost forgot. “Some kid was just being an idiot.”

“An idiot that yelled the Corallines will take the throne before a fag ever sits on it.”

Wow, Andy told him word for word. Judging by the slight narrowing of Quinton’s eyes, he isn’t happy to have said it. I’m not sure what he wants me to say, so I say nothing. I shrug and give Quinton some sort of grin that’s somehow a frown. Even I can’t explain the expression I’m making.

“You should have let the guards tackle him,” Quinton grumbles while turning to walk to the bathroom. Obviously, I chase after him with every intention of sharing that shower.

“Aw, are you getting angry for me, Quinny? That’s sweet.”

“I will knock your front teeth out.”

“You’ve gotten so soft over the—”

Quinton puts me in a headlock before we both plummet to the floor, where I am reminded that no, no, he hasn't gotten nicer over the years. He's still a hell spawn, and I'm still ridiculous to be with him.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

"Monroeville, huh?" Dad asks over dinner. Mom sits at his side. I'm across from her, and Quinton sits next to me. I'm always pleased when Quinton brings up issues with my parents, makes me feel like he honestly knows he belongs.

"Yes, have you heard of it?" Quinton inquires.

"It's the one nearby, isn't it?" Mom hums, smiling. "You toured it a few weeks ago, if I remember correctly."

He did? I don't remember that.

I look at Quinton. The information doesn't shock him, so yeah, I guess it did happen. Hearing that makes my chest ache. I've missed something important, again. I did not know Quinton was scoping out more than one campus. I guess that makes sense. Like he said, grad school is important and even if Northview recently became his first choice, he's going to consider other options.

“Yes, I toured it. After seeing Northview, I feel that both are excellent choices. I’m considering attending Monroeville instead. If both have excellent programs, it will be easier to attend Monroeville since I can travel from here.”

“What a happy coincidence!” Mom claps with excitement while Dad nods. “We thought you’d be moving so far away and wouldn’t see you as much. If Monroeville is a better choice for you, go for it, but don’t make too hasty of a decision.”

“Feel free to talk about it with us as much as you want,” Dad tacks on while pointing accusingly at Quinton. “This is important, Quinton, and we’re here to help. Remember that.”

I nod, causing Quinton to look at me with a cocked brow.

What? Mom and Dad can be supportive, but if I agree I get a look? I see how it is!

“Thanks,” Quinton says. “I’ve still got time, so I’ll keep looking into it.”

“Oh, it’s so exciting to think we’re going to have a doctor in the family!” Mom sighs, causing me to choke on my drink. Quinton chuckles and enjoys the show while my dad is the one to pat my back. Wow, thanks!

“Why are you acting shocked to hear that?” Mom laughs. “Quinton is already part of the family, regardless of when you two get over yourselves and get married!”

Thanks to Mom, I’m choking again, which has Quinton covering his mouth to keep back his laughter. His shoulders shake until he composes himself while I’m gasping for breath.

“Mom!” I hiss once I can breathe again. “Why... why are you like this?”

“It’s fun.”

“It drives me nuts.”

“You’re already bizarre, so it’s fine.” She waves me off while sending a wink to Quinton, who gives her a smile in return. Damn it, why are my family and boyfriend against me? This isn’t fair.

Rather than discuss that any further—my heart cannot handle anymore of this marriage talk right now—I clear my throat and ask, “So when do you have to make your decision? It isn’t soon, is it?”

“I’ve got until graduation, so there’s plenty of time,” Quinton answers. “I’ve already got acceptance letters to both.”

Of course he did, fucking perfect bastard.

“We can talk about it later, after I’ve considered it some more.”

We?

I’m tempted to ask, but Mom is already talking about plans for the annual Christmas ball that is never actually on Christmas and is still over a month away. I’m left sitting quietly in my seat feeling slightly worried that Quinton wants to talk with me while, at the same time, understanding. I guess I don’t want him to feel like he has to go through me. He can do what he feels is right without my permission. Then again, I always talk to him before I decide because I want to hear his thoughts, so it’s flattering.

“Does that sound ok, Aron?”

“Huh?” I look about the table. Everyone stares at me. Well, Quinton is scowling because I obviously wasn’t paying attention. I glare back at him for it.

“I was asking if you’d be ok with going to some local schools in December to read Christmas stories to the children. Your dad and I have done it, but I think it’s time for you to pick up the torch!” Mom says gleefully.

“What about Quinton? Why can’t he come?”

“If you propose, then it would only be fitting for the future king consort to tag along.”

“Mom.”

“Otherwise, I can’t really make him go, so I guess that’s a problem you have to fix.” She takes a sip of her water, smiling from ear to ear while I give her the finger. She chokes on that water, then yells at me for my inappropriate behavior. Whatever, she was asking for it!

“Fine, fine, of course I’m ok with it. Besides, Quinton would probably suck at reading to children.” I stick my tongue out at him.

“It would be best to send a child to spend time with the children,” he counters.

“You motherfucker.”

“Aron!” Mom shouts.

“He is! He’s calling me a child!”

“With such a dirty mouth, I can’t blame him!”

“Why is no one ever on my side?” I look at Dad for help, but he has backed out of this one. He eats his meal, shoving his face full of food as an excuse not to respond. Ok, cool, I see how it is.

I groan. “I hate all of you.”

Quinton and Mom hum, then look at each other with a grin. Damn, they have spent too much time together. This is becoming a serious issue. One of them has to go.

After dinner, though, I sit on my bed flipping through some school work. Quinton takes his shower while I’m trying to catch up in my classes. Sure, senior year has been pretty easy for me so far since I got all that difficult shit outta the way. The fact that I’ve made it this far is a miracle. I deserve

an award, some sort of trophy would be nice. I don't want no fucking degree as a reward, that's shit. Someone throw me a party!

Back to the point, though, I've been missing classes more often. Quinton has done me a lot of favors, helping me through homework assignments more times than I can count. No, we don't need to discuss that. He has enough to hold over my head, so I'm going to pretend like I've done this all on my own.

Speaking of Quinton, his phone goes off on the bedside table. A picture I took of Autumn with her arm slung around Quinton's shoulder pops on screen. With a smile, I lean over and answer, "Quinny's in the shower."

"And you're not with him? A missed opportunity."

I laugh at that. "What's up?"

"Nothing, thought I'd call and ask Quinny how the tour went. Did he tell you about it?"

"Yeah, he said it isn't much different than Monroeville. I guess Northview wasn't as great as he thought it was."

"Seriously?" Autumn sounds more shocked than I was. "I've seen Northview, and it's pretty much the best place there is. I guess I haven't seen Monroeville though. Is he bummed out about it? I know he really wanted to go there."

"Seems ok, but with Quinton that's always the case."

"True. Still, that has become his new dream school. It's odd that he wasn't sold immediately."

See, I was thinking the same thing. Hearing Autumn agree makes my stomach drop. I glance at the bathroom door. The water continues running. I keep my voice low because, who knows, the freak might have some super hearing.

“Hey, uh, you don’t think he’s lying to me, do you?” I ask.

“Lying? About what?”

“Northview.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because of the distance, because it makes me nervous, our relationship is strained enough as is. I can’t help but feel this is fishy. Him suddenly saying Monroeville might be the better option, the school that he can so conveniently commute to, it doesn’t feel right.”

Autumn hesitates, which only worries me more. “I don’t know, Aron. Maybe, but he’s been so confident that things will work out.”

He has? I want to ask how she knows that, what has he said, but Autumn’s still speaking; “Quinton has been saying he will work his schedule around you. You guys will make it work, but maybe he’s second guessing himself? I don’t know. If that’s how you feel, then you better ask him before he makes the wrong decision.”

“Ask him? Hilarious, Autumn, truly, you should be a comedian. What the hell do you think he’ll say to me?”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Wow, no need to attempt to sound like him. I hear it enough already.”

Autumn giggles.

“Seriously though, we have gone over shit like this so much that it’s a weekly thing by now. I think he’ll get annoyed with me if I try to bring it up.”

“Doesn’t matter. This is his future and if he’s making a rushed decision, you need to be the one to smack him over the head for it,” Autumn argues and, ok, I agree but that’s so hard to do! Not the smacking part. That’s super easy.

Before I can respond, though, the water turns off. Quinton will be out any moment and this isn't really a conversation I want him to hear.

"Ok, ok, don't tell him about this though. I'll try to bring it up later," I whisper to Autumn, who happily agrees. Not long after, the bathroom door opens to reveal Quinton in a pair of sweats. He eyes me suspiciously when he sees me holding his phone against my ear.

"Autumn?" He asks.

"Yeah, she's asking about the tour."

Quinton holds out his hand after walking over to me. I say a quick goodbye to Autumn, then hand the phone over. I'm not surprised that Quinton leaves the room. He probably saw me attempting to work and is giving me some space, but I'm concerned to see him leave.

Shit, I wanted to eavesdrop, try to find out if he says anything to Autumn. My plan has been ruined! I could get up, sneak over to the door and listen in but, with my luck, I'll fuck it up. Damn.

Grumbling to myself, I go about working on my schoolwork. My classes are mostly general education now, so I'm working on some math problems when Quinton comes back in a few minutes later.

I grin at him. "You know, you should be a good boyfriend and finish my math homework."

"You should be a good student and do it yourself."

"But it's easier for you."

"I don't care. Do it yourself."

"I need a new partner," I grumble, but the moment Quinton sits next to me, I feel his lips against my cheek. Said cheek warms, even more so when he sits behind me, practically pulling me into his lap with his arms around my waist while I continue working.

Although he said to complete the homework myself, he assists me, pointing out where I've done something wrong or explaining a question to me. I mention nothing about it since I don't want him to stop and, well; it feels nice having his arm around me so I'll keep quiet, for now.

I say that as if I can ever keep quiet for longer than half a second. So it isn't surprising to either of us when I ask, "You said you wanted to talk?"

Quinton hums.

"About school," I add.

He nods. "If it's still bothering you, then yes."

My shoulders roll. Quinton's hold tightens, an attempt at comfort that is definitely working. With his chest pressed to my back and his chin on my shoulder, I feel a thousand times better, but it makes it hard to lie. Because Quinton can feel how tense I am when I grumble, "I just... want you to go to the school you actually want to go to. It's a big deal."

"I know. That's why I am considering every option."

"For the right reasons?"

Quinton immediately leans back. I'm not surprised. There was obvious concern in my voice because no matter what I do, I can't seem to hold a poker face or control myself the way Quinton does. Rather than elaborate or even get snippy, Quinton grabs me by the chin. I know I'm blushing the moment he angles my head so that I'm peering back at him, stuck between his arms while he leans in for a kiss.

The moment his tongue presses against the seam of my lips, I moan and gently take hold of the arm around my waist. His skin breaks out with goosebumps when my thumb caresses the skin. Quinton nips at my bottom lip, sucks on my tongue, then forces forward until I swear all I can taste is him. My chest aches as he pulls away, though our separation lasts all of a

second before he’s kissing me again, breathy, open-mouthed kisses with soft moans breathed against slightly swollen lips.

When Quinton finally takes a break, I’m met with half-lidded eyes focused on me as he says, “Yes, for the right reasons.”

“Huh?”

What were we talking about again? Sorry, all I’m doing is staring at his lips. Quinton rolls his eyes, but his smirk states he is pleased with the outcome before kissing me again.

Ah, right, school. We were talking about school.

But it’s kinda hard to focus on anything when Quinton has his hands on me. Especially when his fingers massage the skin of my happy trail, teasingly pressing beneath my sweatpants, but never more. My thighs shake, expecting what’s coming. Yet even when Quinton’s hand that I’ve come to know so well sinks beneath my pants, my body hums with desire as strong as ever.

His touch is searing hot, it always is. Years later and I’m still left trembling. Not that Quinton is any better. When I take his bottom lip between my teeth, he sucks in a deep breath to hold back a groan before I force my tongue back into his mouth, reminding him I can take control of this situation too, if I really wanted. I am conceding only for the moment!

Quinton lets out a satisfied groan before I pull away, gasping at the sudden friction coming from his hand rubbing me through my boxers. Never breaking that barrier, only teasing with gentle touches that have me groaning and thrusting my hips in a silent request for more.

“Weren’t we having a serious conversation?” I grunt after the unexpected roll of Quinton’s hips, sending jolts of pleasure through my electrified veins.

Our hips pick up a soft rocking motion. I push back against him while his thighs close around me, keeping our bodies close. The heat between us soars to overwhelming proportions, making me consider if clothes are ever truly necessary between us. Now Quinton has one hand on my hip, the other still rubs me through my clothes.

“We can still talk,” Quinton whispers, nipping at my neck, then running his tongue down the hollow of my throat before marking the skin of my shoulder.

“You’re a bastard.”

Cause how the hell am I meant to talk like this? The only thing that’s talking is my dick, and it’s saying hurry the hell up, ya bastard!

Quinton chuckles, that cocky, yet frustratingly sexy sound. It’s breathed against the back of my neck. A shiver runs down my spine. One he feels and so smiles, which I can feel against my neck. Suddenly his breath is cold, but I know it’s because my body is heating up with every little movement.

Is it too hot in here? I think it’s too hot. There’s liquid fire in my veins, hot yet pleasurable, causing my toes to curl. Even more so when Quinton pushes us forward, so I’m on my hands and knees. My face is flush from feeling his bare chest against my back, but the pleasure coiling in my stomach has taught me it’s better not to question it. Besides, I’ll get my turn.

The soft rock of our hips has turned into a rough grind. Quinton breathes heavily. So am I, aroused and desperate. But now his mind has deemed that, yeah, clothes are unnecessary. I shiver when Quinton pulls away to drop my pants around my knees. What my body has been humming for since the start finally gets what it wants. Quinton’s hand grasps my cock, which throbs almost painfully from the touch. I bite my lip to hold back my moans

when Quinton’s eager hand moves, a quick and sensual roll of his wrist accompanied by brief kisses to the back of my neck.

White lines my vision with the added stimulation of Quinton’s hips continuing to grind against me. My legs tremble, feeling him through his pants and knowing what’s about to happen. Once more, my body yearns for both, pressing back into Quinton’s heat while also thrusting into his hand. The pleasure is too great. My fingers dig into the sheets, knuckles turning white, sweat rolling down my thighs just as I hear familiar rummaging sounds.

“Rock, paper, scissors,” I growl, glancing back to find Quinton staring at me with a knowing smirk. A bottle of near empty lube is already on the bed while he grabs a condom from the bedside table.

“Really?” He hums, rubbing his thumb over the head of my cock. A moan spills over my parted lips, hips shaking, then legs nearly giving out when I feel the familiar cold sensation slipping between my parted cheeks.

“Fuck, fine, fine. Next time I get to!” My entire body shivers when Quinton’s hand moves once more, only to follow the same pace of his finger thrusting inside me.

“Whatever you say, Princess.”

I’ll be mad about that later. Right now, I don’t think I’m capable of proper function. Then again, it’s easily arguable I never am, but with Quinton jerking me off and the now two thrusting fingers continuously abusing the bundle of nerves within me that makes the ecstasy soar, stopping isn’t even an option.

There’s only the familiar feeling of pleasure mixed with embarrassment, invulnerability and affection that used to leave me rattled afterwards. Now it leaves my heart feeling warm. Especially when Quinton kisses so

tenderly at my back or how he nuzzles his head against my own. He moves his hands faster, enticing more and more pleasure cries from my lips. White lines my vision. I try to voice this to Quinton, who only curls his fingers, making my arms almost give out as my orgasm slams into me. Quinton kisses me passionately, likely feeling the call of his name against my parted lips.

It feels good. It always does. Always intense enough to leave me woozy. My body is weak, but I refuse to let my arms give out. My limbs shake, but I still widen my stance when Quinton pulls away. The tearing of the condom wrapper sends a shiver down my spine. The rough hold on my hips tells me to prepare, but my spine still curls and muscles tense at the initial thrust of Quinton's hips.

It's hot. And my breathing is heavy, mixed in with Quinton's deep breaths and quiet groans. His fingers dig into my hips. It's oddly satisfying, a sort of sick pleasure at knowing that even after years our bodies still yearn for the other. When I make the first move to pull away, Quinton doesn't hesitate to follow. His hips retreat only to slam back in forcing a low groan of his name out of the back of my throat. Which was definitely what he wanted because that's the last coherent thing I say. Everything from that point on is a mess of jumbled cries of pleasure and soft grunts as Quinton continuously moves against me.

My body is on autopilot, only knowing the intense heat filling me, sending white hot pleasure through me like all the times before. But it's just as breathtaking, just as intense, just as great as every time before, because if the bastard wasn't always perfect, then the world would end.

Sometimes he slows, and my body jerks back to desperately feel him. Other times, he thrusts so hard that I cry out. His hands roam from my hips

to my chest, fingers abusing my chest that I never imagined being sensitive, yet here we are. The pleasure builds, pure ecstasy coursing through me. When Quinton slows his movements again, dragging out our pleasure, I plead, “Harder, harder, Quinton!”

His next thrust has me reeling. My knuckles actually hurt from how hard I’m gripping the sheets and my throat is sore. Which only worsens when Quinton’s hand reaches forward to grab my cock. Damn it, I’m close, and I dig my hips back to meet Quinton’s powerful thrusts.

Quinton growls, thrusting into me with the rapid movement of his hand. I can’t. I won’t last much longer. Not with Quinton’s hand teasing my tip or the constant pounding of his hips against mine. But Quinton’s desperate too, thrusts jerking out of rhythm, telling me he’s not far behind, so I push back harder, faster, pushing him deeper. His nails dig into my skin, leaning forward so that his chest is against my back. I know what he wants and so turn to capture his lips in a sloppy kiss just as his hips jerk without a clear rhythm.

And maybe I would have lasted longer if the rotten bastard didn’t breathe a few simple words against my lips, “I love you, Aron.”

“I love you too,” I reply before Quinton forces his tongue between my lips. The heated kiss lasts until we ride out our orgasms, bodies trembling together until we pull apart, breathless and satisfied. Yet somehow I am more embarrassed by Quinton kissing sweetly at my shoulders, like what we just did was nothing compared to the affectionate touch. But, for us, I guess it kind of is.

“You’re heavy,” I grunt, my arms shaking so badly that I’m surprised they’re holding us up.

Quinton snorts. “Tired, Princess?”

I elbow Quinton in the gut, but his response is to lay his entire weight on me, which results in me dropping. The moment I do, I shout, because I land on something. Quinton stares at me with wide blinking eyes of confusion while mine widen in realization.

“Damn it, Quinton, my homework!”

Quinton actually howls with laughter moments later when we find that my school book and notebook have some rather telling material on them.

“You fucking bastard!”

Quinton snorts with melodious laughter, incapable of taking a breath as his eyes water with joyous tears.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

"So why didn't the two of you further discuss Quinton's schooling?"

"I had homework to do."

Autumn definitely doesn't believe me. Dahlton, on the other hand, smiles brightly and nods, completely taking my words for gospel until he looks at his girlfriend. Then it clicks. And he faces me with his round brown eyes before asking, "What kind of homework?"

"The physical kind," Autumn answers, wiggling her eyebrows while Dahlton cackles.

I groan and slam my head against the table. "I see why you two are together. You're both fucking awful."

The three of us are currently sitting in a nice little restaurant near campus. It has a second floor with some closed off rooms so we may eat in peace. Guards stand watch outside while I attempt to speak with Autumn further about Quinton because, out of everyone, she's most likely to have some

possible information. Dahlton? Definitely not. What he knows is only from us but he obviously tagged along for the free food.

“Why don’t you try doing some research yourself?” Dahlton asks, causing me to look at him in disbelief.

“Me? Do research? On a grad school?”

“I suppose that is a dumb suggestion.”

“You know, I asked that but I don’t like you agreeing with me.”

Autumn giggles and leans forward, resting her head atop her fist. “That is a good idea though. Go to their college website, do some research on their biomedical labs and classes. Look at some reviews if you honestly think you have to.”

“Shouldn’t we also consider that, even if Quinton is lying, you’ll find out eventually,” Dahlton says, earning a raised brow from me. “Because if he goes to Monroeville when Northview is clearly better, the press will be all over that.”

“True.” Autumn hums. “But by then maybe he’ll have come up with a better reason why he chose to go there. Still, I think you need to sit down and have a serious discussion while making sure there’s distance so you aren’t tempted to rip his clothes off.”

“He started it!” I holler, flushing furiously at the realization that by saying that I admitted sex stopped the conversation.

Autumn cackles like the wicked witch that she is. Dahlton shakes his head while saying, “Wow, such a passionate relationship you two have. When’s the wedding again?”

“Stop bringing up weddings!”

“Ok, what about a baby shower?”

Autumn suddenly slams her hands against the table. “Can we be the Godparents?!”

Dahlton scowls and tugs at Autumn’s sleeve to say, “There are too many couples in this friend group. We have Langley and Ariel, and Cassidy and Nora to go up against.”

“Why are you discussing this as if I’m not here?” I growl, glaring at them when they finally return their attention to me. Autumn leans over, whispers something to Dahlton, who snickers, then they’re both smiling at me like they aren’t pissing me off.

I sigh. “Why did I ask you two for help?”

“Because you have no one else.” Autumn claps happily, like that’s a good thing, like she’s proud. I hate this bitch.

“Autumn, you’re meant to help me because you’re the only other person Quinton really talks to. Has he said anything that could mean something else?” I ask, scrunching my nose at my phrasing, but it seems Autumn understands me well and has no issue answering it.

She hums. “Well, he has talked to me a lot about school, saying that it has been stressing him out. There’s been a lot of work piling up, y’know? So many labs and projects, so school might be one thing, but something else may bother him, especially since it’s Quinton. If he’s stressed, there’s a good reason for it.”

She’s right. Because Quinton handles everything with grace. He plans out everything to better fit his schedule, his lifestyle, except for me. I’m the one giant bump in his once well paved road. So if he’s bothered, there’s a reason. I would know. High school proved to me what a stressed Quinton was like and just how much he will hide in a weird attempt to keep me happy. The freaking rotten son of a bitch, lovable sack of shit. I’m going to

kiss him as soon as he gets home. And maybe attack him once we're alone. We'll see.

"Corner him. Get him all hot and bothered, then ask," she suggests.

"W-What?!" I sputter, staring at Autumn with wide eyes while she laughs and Dahlton, he's going up my shit list too, nods in agreement.

"Seriously? You're agreeing with your crazy girlfriend?" I ask in disbelief.

"It is always best to agree with the crazy girlfriend," Dahlton responds and, ok, I can agree with that.

"Well, that isn't happening, but thanks for your useless advice." I sigh just as our food is brought in. We all smile and thank the waitress, who walks away after a kind smile.

While we're eating our food, we further discuss with me asking, "How do I know if it's a good school? I'd like to look anyway because, I mean... he'll be busy there for the next. What? Another possible four years?"

"Yeah, plus maybe if he ends up choosing Northview like we expected, you can look for some apartments around campus," Autumn suggests. "It's in a pleasant town. Could probably get a place with good security and make plans to stay there on the weekends so it's not always Quinton traveling to see you."

Oh, he would like that. It's always Quinton coming back to the palace. Sure, it's safer there, but if he moves so far away, then it'd be such a pain for him to do all the traveling. Maybe it was a good idea to talk with Autumn.

"And if he goes to Monroeville, then at least you know it was because he actually liked the school," Autumn finishes, offering a kind smile. Then she reaches across the table to take my hand, squeezing it in her own. "It'll be

ok, Aron. It’s tough right now with everything happening at once, but it’ll get better.”

“But we’re both just going to keep getting busier. What if we barely have time to see each other?” I pout, although if anyone asks, I definitely am not pouting.

“Keep this up and you’ll worry yourself to death.” Autumn pats my hand before releasing it.

Although she and Dahlton reassure me that everything will be ok, my gut keeps twisting uncomfortably. Not that I don’t trust Quinton. I trust him more than I trust myself. It’s just that... I don’t want to lose him. Not now. Not ever.

And I know it’s been hard for the both of us. I’m always busy, always trying to show everyone that I can be the king they want and need. I have to prove myself and sometimes that means setting aside what I want to do so I can do what I need to do, not necessarily for myself but for others.

And Quinton has a life he wants to live, one that is difficult to achieve when with me. I have my duties, my people who I love and wish to help, so when our worlds collide rather than merge, it makes a mess of everything. Maybe I am thinking too much about it. If I trust Quinton so much, then why am I so concerned about this?

Autumn’s right. I’m going to worry myself to death, so with a deep breath, I decide to push it to the back of my mind. If Quinton brings up school again, then I’ll be here to discuss it. If not, then I trust he is choosing the best school for him.

So the days go on with me jumping between regular college student and royal duties as the crown prince. Christmas grows closer and closer. My schedule gets packed with requests to visit charity events, children's centers,

hospitals and so much more. Typically, I go around a lot to such events anyway, but around the holidays it amplifies by a million, so I'm tired, always tired.

I return home day by day to find Quinton sitting over his thesis. So I walk up behind him and wrap my arms around his shoulders. I smile at how he so easily leans into the touch, yet looks at me with a scowl. I know it's fake because when it's fake Quinton scrunches his nose, an action that is meant to make him look annoyed. Except his naturally annoyed face does no such thing.

But I say nothing, only lean over to capture his lips and ask, "How's it going?"

"It's a thesis. It's awful."

I laugh. "You're the one that wanted to go to grad school."

"I didn't say I hate it."

"Aren't awful things always what you hate?"

"No. You're awful."

I slap him over the back of the head with a chuckle. "I'll let that slide, since it implies you don't hate me."

"Hm."

I wish I could say we cuddle or watch TV or talk, however, like most nights now, we sit in silence. I'm tired, laying in bed with half-lidded eyes, not really paying attention to some reality show on TV. At least my homework is done, but after today's work I just wanna rest. Quinton, on the other hand, continues working, constantly typing away on the computer, searching through mounds of books or calling his lab partners. Sometimes, like tonight, he leaves to check on something in the lab or meet up at the library. I get a swift goodbye after his belongings are packed, then he's

gone, on the phone talking with his lab partner about things that I can't possibly comprehend other than these and lots of work to be done.

The moment Quinton leaves, the room feels empty. Although we weren't talking, it felt better with him here. Being alone gives me time to think and giving me time to think is never good because, here I am again, realizing that times like this will worsen once Quinton starts grad school. And now I'm thinking of all the lost time, our lives just drifting away until they aren't even our lives but his and mine.

Ouch. Is that my heart breaking? Cause it hurts like a biiiiiiitch.

Now with that piss poor mood, I think I need some ice cream! Jumping out of bed, I'm about to head out of the room when I notice a stack of papers left on Quinton's desk and a green folder. Crap, did he forget it?

I make the mistake of attempting to multitask, grabbing both while reaching for my phone, so obviously my dumb ass drops all of it, phone included. Crap! Really? If I don't clean this up, Quinton will be pissed. Well, I say pissed, but he'll just call me an idiot and drop it after five seconds of arguing. Still! I made the mess so I'll clean it.

Leaning down, I grab all the papers to put them back together, only not all of them are school work. My hand hesitates over the familiar emblem at the top of a pamphlet hidden in the pile; Northview University.

When I reach for the pamphlet, pulling it out of the stack, I find Monroeville's right behind. He had these but didn't show me? What? Did he think I wouldn't understand? What a jerk! I'll read the whole thing and —

My thoughts freeze the moment I open Northview University's brochure. Flipping it in my hand makes my heart race because even I can see how great of an opportunity it is. I desperately read over Monroeville's next. My

stomach drops and my heart plummets. At first glance, even I can see Northview is a better choice. The campus, what they offer, even past alumni, Northview screams the best choice while Monroeville is good, but Quinton can do better. He can do so much better and he deserves so much better. He can get into Northview. Damn it, he already has! But maybe Monroeville's brochure is just bad. Right? That can be a thing, at least, I'm hoping it is.

In a panic, I grab the iPad on our bedside table, immediately visiting both their sites. The next hour and a half is spent with me combing through whatever I can. Reading testimonials from students, parents and workers alike, digging into the grad programs and what they offer but it never changes; Northview is better. Their lab is better. The opportunities are better. Everything is better.

If I can tell that, then Quinton sure as hell knows it and...and he's accepted. He's already in, so why is he considering all his options? Northview is the best option! There's a voice in the back of my head saying to trust him. He's picking Monroeville for a reason.

"For the right reasons?"

"Yes, for the right reasons."

Come on, Quinton. You're fucking kidding.

I throw the iPad aside, luckily, into the pillows, then twist my fingers into my hair. The hold is painful, but my head throbs, along with my heart. And all I can think about is how I probably freaked him out by panicking so much about the distance that he's willing to throw away one of the best opportunities of a lifetime. Hell, Northview has an amazing study abroad program attached to their graduate plan. Quinton could study overseas!

The experience and opportunities that Northview could give him far surpass Monroeville and he’s about to give that up because I can’t stand the idea of distance? Maybe some would see that as romantic. For me, it just hurts. Because I’d hate myself forever if Quinton didn’t get to do everything he’s ever wanted in life simply because I had cold feet.

Damn it all to hell. What should I do? Do I try to beat around the bush? Make him explain why he is choosing Monroeville instead, or do I just... come out and ask what the fuck he thinks he’s doing? I don’t know, but I better come up with something quick because my body apparently has an autopilot setting that is permanently on, which is why I’m already calling Quinton.

And, oops, he doesn’t give me enough time to think by answering on the second ring, “What?”

Normally I’d complain about the lack of a hello or some form of proper greeting, but it seems beating around the bush is not what I’m into today since I immediately say, “I looked into Northview and Monroeville University.”

Quinton is silent. A moment where I wonder if he thinks he’s been caught, then he asks, “And?”

“And I saw the pamphlets on your desk.”

“You dug through my desk?”

“No, I thought you left something and attempted to multitask, but made a mess so I saw them. Then I looked it up and Quinton, just...be honest because even I can tell Northview is the better choice. Why haven’t you already said yes to them?”

Quinton doesn’t answer even after I’ve waited for an answer. He only sighs.

“What about Monroeville makes it the better option?” I ask. My voice and hands tremble. I sit on our bed, one leg hanging off the side, the other crossed before me so I can grip my ankle with such ferocity that I feel a bruise forming. “The lab is amazing. Even I can see that it is! And the professors have excellent qualifications. The campus is outstanding and all their programs offer far more opportunities in your specific field. There’s even an amazing program to study abroad that we all know you can do! It’s...you can do whatever you want by going there, so why aren’t you jumping at this?”

“Why the hell do you think?” Quinton suddenly hisses, his voice low and sharper than any blade. He must still be in the library. I hear him saying a soft goodbye to his lab partner.

“I think it’s because I’ve been freaking out about the distance, but that’s no reason to give all this up,” I answer. “I’ll get used to it. We’ll get used to it, so don’t throw this away.”

“Do you honestly think that’s all?”

Huh? I can’t even think of what else he has to say. What could the other reason be? Before I can ask, Quinton forgets that he’s meant to be the quiet one. The truth finally comes out in a heap of rushed whispers that are somehow a yell.

“This isn’t just about me anymore,” Quinton says. “It’s not just my future here. It’s ours, and if our talk at the park the other day wasn’t proof enough of that, then I don’t know what else would be. Think about it, Aron. What’s going to happen when we get married? Regardless of whether I get my degree, I’d take on royal duties alongside you. Just like your parents. It doesn’t matter if I get a degree or not because I’ll never actually have a career.”

My mind screams, knowing that he’s right. And my heart clenches, the guilt already eating away at me.

“Maybe I’ll have a few years at a facility that has the needed security for me, but even then it’s an if and pure luck. And going abroad? The amount of money your parents would have to spew out for protection alone—”

“But it’d be worth it!” I try, only to be shot down.

“I don’t want to put them through all that trouble, or us. What’s the point of going to Northview, getting all those opportunities when I’m never going to actually do anything with them? It’s taking away that chance from someone else that may really need the opportunity while slamming it in my face that it doesn’t matter! I’ll be so busy with grad school and you with work, so it’ll stress you out even more.”

“I-I’m fine, Quinton. Really. I can make it work. We can, I know we can, so please, fuck, please don’t throw all this away!”

Quinton sighs, the sound so exhausted that I can envision him rubbing his temple in frustration. I never thought he would think this seriously about it. I didn’t realize what was really bothering him and it makes me feel like such an ass.

Shouldn’t I have known? Because I feel like I’m not taking us as seriously as he is. Quinton is always one step ahead, always considering every option for more than just himself. I feel like I’m letting him down. I’m always letting everyone down. It’s as if the world has learned to run and I have yet to crawl. Everyone looks back at me, laughs at me, judges me, or is left disappointed and the one I crave to impress, that I fear disappointing, is the one that I always let down.

Why am I always one step behind?

“I know you’ve been stressed lately and I’m sorry I didn’t know that it was about this,” I mumble, trying desperately to breathe regularly. It has become so tough lately to take a breath.

“Are you psychic?” Quinton grunts. “How would you know if I don’t tell you?”

“Because it should have been obvious... and maybe I knew, but didn’t want to think about it.”

“Don’t start that.”

“What?”

“Blaming yourself for everything.”

“Is it not my fault?” I ask, feeling my stomach twist into a knot. “Because you wouldn’t have this issue at all if you weren’t with me. You’d already be accepting Northview’s invitation and going on to be some smart ass working at a company that invents the zombie virus.”

“Is that the life you want for me?” Quinton growls, sending a shiver down my spine.

“I... I want you to live the life that you want without me getting in the way.”

“The life I want,” Quinton snorts and, dare I say, chuckles. But the sound is distant, colder than anything I’ve ever heard. There is no amusement in his tone. He goes silent, a second that stretches into eternity.

“I’m not coming home tonight,” he blurts.

“What?”

“Goodnight, Aron.”

“Wait, Quin—”

The line is dead.

“Damn it!” I throw my phone across the room, uncaring of the loud bang that follows the device hitting the floor.

Curling my legs up to my chest, I bury my face in my knees and grip my pants until I fear I may rip them. My body is hot. Heart hammering in my chest. Head ready to explode. Palms sweating. I can’t breathe, so I stretch out on the bed, heaving long breaths that never feel like enough. All I can think about is Quinton, what he’s thinking, how he’s feeling, what I said once again to bother him and how the hell we’re meant to fix this.

But there’s never an answer. So I end up laying there all night, frustrated, confused, and angry until, around three in the morning, I wake up. Something hits me. A memory of our conversation that suddenly plays in my head.

“Think about it, Aron. What’s going to happen when we get married?”

My face is burning hot, heart thumping so loud it’s ringing in my ears.

Quinton didn’t say if.

He said *when*.

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CHAPTER NINE

Quinton said he wasn't coming home. He didn't say he wouldn't be coming home for three straight days. With how he reacted I'm not surprised, definitely annoyed, concerned and angry with myself but in no way surprised.

Mom and Dad are confused. Quinton must not have told them and I sure as hell don't plan to either, although talking with someone would probably help immensely since I can't figure out what the hell is going on. What do I say? What should I do? How do I solve this insane problem that I never imagined would be a problem?

Quinton is questioning himself. That isn't meant to happen. I am meant to do all the questioning, and he has all the answers! That is how we work. It is a system that must not be messed with, otherwise I don't know what to do!

Yet hearing him, the defeat and exhaustion and confusion laced in every word, has made me realize Quinton has always had questions too. He just didn't always tell me about them. And that hurts, because we're in this together. Whatever this is, life, dating, it's a two player game, but Quinton's been doing so much of it on his own. Now he may make a decision he'll regret for the rest of his life and I may be the reason for it.

What the hell am I meant to do?

"Aron, are you ok?" Nora asks, appearing at my side with a sad frown. She sits next to me, the same spot she takes every time for class, but today she feels far away. Or maybe it's me that's far away. Who even knows anymore?

"Fine," I lie, which she sees right through.

"You don't look fine."

"You calling me ugly?"

"Aron." She doesn't sound angry or annoyed. Only concerned.

Understandable. I'm concerned for myself. I can't even hide the exhaustion in my voice. After spending so much time with Quinton, you'd think I'd learn a thing or two, but nope, still very obvious to all.

"It's nothing, Nora. I'm tired, that's all."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Me being tired?"

Nora rolls her eyes. "No, what's bothering you?"

"It's nothing, really."

She frowns. "Aron. It's definitely something. Don't even try."

I would try some more, but she's looking at me with such a sorrowful smile that I actually think I'd feel bad if I said no. I was thinking earlier I should talk to someone and now Nora is offering. She wouldn't tell if I

asked her not to, but it still feels like I don't want to talk but at the same time, yes and no and maybe so and who fucking knows. Wow, that all rhymed. I should be a rap artist.

"Mm, let's say Cassidy had to make a huge life decision, and she seemed so sure of herself before, but then she starts second guessing herself because of what might happen in the future. What would you do?" I ask.

Nora blinks rapidly, probably trying to put that mess of a question together. Then she leans back. Students pile in for class. She probably has a minute to answer, and the girl is skilled because she does it.

"I'd tell her that the present is most important because we don't know the future, so we should be happy in the now and hope it brings us happiness later." Nora smiles almost hesitantly, likely unaware that she helped me. Before I can thank her for it, she asks, "Have you talked to Quinton about this huge life decision?"

"Uh…"

"Did you fight about it?"

"Uuuuhhhhhh…"

Nora giggles. "I'm sure you two will talk it out, whatever it's about." She pats me on the shoulder. "Just make sure to actually talk sooner rather than later. The more you wait, the worse it'll get."

"Yeah...I know. I'll talk to him later."

At least, I hope I will.

He's pissed. He has to be, seeing as he won't even answer my texts. I attempted to call on the first day. After ten straight to voicemails, I gave up and tried texting instead. At least Andy can give me updates, but only that Quinton is going to class as usual and the security detail remains at his apartment. So it's me he doesn't want to see, which I knew, but how long

will he keep this up? Shouldn't we talk? As soon as possible, just like Nora said. This is a huge fucking deal. Not just the school thing, but how he's feeling.

He said when.

I can't stop thinking about that.

Not if, when. Like us, staying together is a guaranteed. Even after such a big fight and how he's been feeling with school, Quinton still earnestly believes we'll work out and we'll...we'll get married one day.

The fact that my heart races at the mere thought of marriage is both annoying and, well, heart racing. I wish his unexpected admittance came under better circumstances, but this is what I got, and now I know. I know how serious Quinton is about school and about us. If I knew he was thinking like that, if I knew how awful he had been feeling, I'd…

I'd what?

Apologize on my hands and knees, beg for forgiveness, blame myself for ruining his dreams, because nothing in our lives can ever be simple. Which would only make him angrier? Because Quinton hates when I apologize like that and I hate he accepts everything like it's ok. Damn it, my head really hurts. He should know not to make me worry like this. I always overreact!

But I can't keep pushing this talk off and neither can he. If that bastard thinks I'm just going to sit around and wait for him to stop moping, then he has another thing coming! I can't let him throw all this away. Even with what he said, and even if I know it's true, it doesn't mean he should have to give everything up. Maybe he won't work in the field, or maybe he'll get ten to fifteen years. We don't know, so he can't decide now based on if it'll happen or not!

Quinton, aren’t you supposed to be smart? Freaking jackass.

After classes have ended for the day, I get in my car and say, “Take me to Quinton’s.”

“Huh?” my driver, Jeremy, asks with wide eyes after I slip into the car.

“To Quinton’s.”

“Has Andy approved this?”

“He’ll get over it. Just drive.”

Jeremy gives me a look. The look that says he’s going to complain to me later, after Andy gives him a good lecturing about driving the prince randomly. I don’t get how my order to take me somewhere is random, but apparently, that’s what Andy says.

Jeremy sighs and informs Andy through those stupid ear wires that we’re going to Quinton’s. I can already hear Andy yapping Jeremy’s ear off, but he quickly cuts it off by saying, “Can you be quiet? I’m driving.”

I snicker, and the ride continues smoothly. By smoothly I mean absolutely gut wrenching because the closer we get to Quinton’s, the more nervous I feel.

Is it suddenly really hot in here? No? I’m just heating up from pure paranoia? Cool, cool. Can someone die from being scared to death? Should I look it up? Probably not since I’m sure the answer is yes, but having it reaffirmed by the internet will just make me freak out even more.

And we’re here, sitting outside of the sixteen story building that rarely houses university students, but hey, Quinton is dating the prince so he needs damn good security. No, he was not pleased, but if the taxpayers don’t want royalty spending a lot of money, then maybe they shouldn’t try to break into their houses, attack them on the street, or be so interested in nudes taken by paparazzi illegally. If I said all that, I’d be the asshole. Whatever.

Quinton is still in class, so I'm not surprised to see he isn't home. However, it's been a while since I've been to his place. It's as spotless as ever, even if he's the only one cleaning it. Like he'd let my parents hire a maid for him. They tried, trust me.

If there's one good thing about being here, it's seeing that none of our pictures are missing or face down. Isn't that what happens when you start to hate your partner? You put away their pictures, but ours are up. The ones Mom put on the walls of the four of us, even the ones of Quinton and his mom and, of course, plenty of the two of us.

I linger on one picture in his room sitting on the desk. It makes me laugh and also miss high school since it was taken during our senior year. I pulled Quinton in for a picture on campus a few days before graduation. While I look like an idiot grinning from ear to ear, eyes wide like they're about to pop out of my skull, Quinton has a soft smile with his eyes fixated on me. I was so embarrassed about the photo I hid it from Mom for about two months, but once she found it; she framed it and give herself, Quinton, and me a copy.

Now I'm grateful we have it. Every time I see the picture I think of school even if all the memories aren't the greatest. The memories with Quinton are pretty damn good, not that I'd ever tell the bastard that.

Sadly, I'm not given a lot of time to come up with some grand but totally ridiculous speech to give Quinton before he arrives. I was lost in my own thoughts for too long because the front door opens. He has to know I'm here. Andy and the others are outside, so I'm not surprised that he doesn't come to the bedroom. The jerk is definitely avoiding me. That never panned out in all our years of being together, so I'd like to argue that he is the true

idiot. I am keeping lists of all these reasons and will one day bring it up, full on petition style. Just you wait, Quinton!

Stepping out of the room, I find Quinton moving about the kitchen. His bag is on the couch, phone on the island and a glass of water in his hand.

“Been a while since I’ve come to your apartment.” I laugh nervously, watching Quinton’s shoulders roll with obvious discomfort. Oh, this is going to be bad. My spidey senses are already tingling!

“Are you sure you aren’t working on the next zombie virus? It’s as freakishly clean as ever here, like you’re trying to hide something.” Humor is not working. He won’t look at me and he literally threw the glass in the sink so that it shatters. I flinch at the low growl that escapes his throat.

“Quinton?” I whisper.

“How long are you staying?” He asks abruptly. “I have work to do.”

“Can we talk first?”

“About?”

Oh, so he’s playing like that. Fine, ok, I can be the mature one in this case. Absolutely. I can do it. Taking a deep breath, I join Quinton in the kitchen. He grabs some paper towels and starts picking up shards of glass with a rag, sitting them in the paper towels. Wow, he even disposes of glass carefully. I am the jerk that forgets to do that then has nightmares about the garbage men cutting themselves. He pisses me off.

I lean against the kitchen counter, watching carefully, unsure where to start. Should I bring up the thing that has honestly been on my mind way more than necessary? The when, not if.

No. Because my heart is beating way too fast already, so let’s... let’s ignore that.

“I was hoping we could talk about what you said on the phone, about school and your career,” I say.

“What about it?”

“Come on, Quinny.”

But he isn’t budging, so I let out a sigh. “Listen, I really didn’t dig through your stuff and it was only by accident I saw the pamphlets. I know it’s still not my decision to make on which school you go to, but I want to talk about it and not just sciencey bullshit.”

“Sciency bullshit?” At least he sounds a little amused. Good sign number one.

“Yeah, like who has a better lab, or whatever. I mean, you’ve had your heart set on Northview and I know you love the school. It’s clearly better and, ok, yeah, you probably won’t be in your field until you retire, but you can get ten, fifteen, maybe even twenty years even! We don’t know!”

I grab his arm after Quinton drops the last shard in the paper towels. He won’t look at me, not even when I tug annoyingly. I don’t let go though when I rest my chin on his shoulder and mumble, “My dad won’t pass on his duties for a while, probably not even until we’re in our forties or fifties or even later than that. And no one expects you to give up everything you’ve ever wanted to take on royal duties. Well, some do, but they’re jackasses, ignore them.”

Quinton huffs. He sets the paper towel aside.

“What I’m trying to really say is, stop focusing on the what if’s of the future because the present is most important. We don’t know the future, so we should be happy in the now and hope it brings us happiness later.”

Now that gets Quinton’s attention. He looks at me with a narrowed gaze, one that has a lump forming in my throat. That lump disappears and turns

into a groan when Quinton asks, “Where did you hear that?”

“Why can’t you believe I came up with it myself?”

“You definitely heard it from someone.”

“Nuh uh.”

His cocked brow states otherwise.

“Nora.”

Quinton hums. “That sounds right.”

“Fuck you. I say good stuff sometimes.”

“Eh.”

“Fine, screw you! I won’t try to make you feel better ever again.”

I attempt to leave, but Quinton quickly wraps his arms around my waist, holding me in place. I grumble angrily when he buries his face into the back of my neck, breathing the next few words against my skin, “So childish.”

“Says the one who ignored my texts and calls for three days.”

“You deserved it.”

“Huh?”

“You annoyed me.”

“But I always annoy you.”

Quinton pushes me away. I nearly trip over my own feet but catch myself like the pro that I am on the island. Now Quinton heads for the bedroom, grabbing his bag from the couch as he does.

“So, are we going to talk about the schools?” I ask.

Quinton lingers in the doorway, looking back at me with a scowl. I can tell he still isn’t sure. His shoulders are stiff.

“You want to go to Northview, don’t you?” I step around the island, but I don’t feel like I can cross the room. It’s weird to think of Quinton not knowing what to say. Being stumped and clueless is usually my job. Lately

we've been switching a lot and I don't like that. It's weird. Let's go back to our regularly scheduled program. Especially when I see him sigh and stare at the floor like he wants it to swallow him whole. Cool. Same.

"I prefer Northview," Quinton finally answers.

"Then you should go."

"What about you?"

"Aw, it's adorable that you care so much about me, Quinny."

His glare is borderline demonic. No, scratch that, it is demonic. I actually shiver then hold my hands up in self defense. "Sorry, just trying to lighten the mood."

"Stop. You're terrible at it."

"Partners are meant to be supportive."

"And honest."

I roll my eyes. "I told you before, I'll be fine. Sure, I'll freak out from time to time, but we can make it work. Aren't you supposed to be the overly confident one?"

Now it's Quinton's turn to roll his eyes. Seems he's done with this conversation because he quickly says, "I do have work, though."

Ah, that makes sense. His thesis and all that probably isn't finished. I don't know. I am not involved in that garbage. Still, I don't know if we're done talking. Is he going to Northview or not? But maybe I shouldn't push it. We've at least talked and made up, so that's good.

I gesture to the door. "I'll let Andy know I'll be leaving then."

"No, you can stay," Quinton quickly says, and maybe my cheeks heat up a bit, but we shall not discuss that.

"Does that mean you're not angry anymore?" I ask, feeling triumphant until I see this odd look in Quinton's eyes. I'm not sure how to explain it.

He doesn’t look angry. Dare I say it, it’s almost a sorrowful joy that has my stomach twisting into a knot.

“I’m not angry,” he says.

But I feel there needs to be more words at the end of that sentence, only I don’t know what or how to ask. Besides, he gestures for me to follow and acts like his usual bastard self throughout the night, so maybe I was just seeing things.

Or maybe I just really hope I was seeing things.

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CHAPTER TEN

Quinton

Aron is busy. Always busy.

Often, he runs around like a chicken with his head cut off. The body is present, but not so much the head, and that is by no means an insult. A full-time college student, part time prince, and full time fool must be far more difficult than I, or any, could comprehend. So, I'm fine.

I'm fine waiting. I'm fine when he missed our anniversary. I'm fine when he forgot my birthday. I'm fine when he didn't make it to my convention. I'm fine when he canceled another planned date. I've never cared much about celebrating anniversaries or birthdays. He doesn't need to come to my conventions, and we aren't kids anymore. Dates aren't necessary. They're silly, childish things for silly, childish people… right?

We see each other at home, even if most times I'm working on a thesis and he's asleep, like now. Aron rests on my bed, remote in his lap, and head knocked to the side. He snores when he falls asleep on his back or sitting

up. He drools if he falls asleep with his mouth open. It’s funny so I wait to move him. He doesn’t even stir when I position him on his side beneath the covers. He curls into them with a smile, a smile I don’t think he realizes he hasn’t been showing as much lately.

Aron has two smiles now. One for the public, forced but honestly expertly done so. Most fall for it. The other is genuine, the one that makes his eyes smile along with him. The one that pulls at his cheeks and shows rows of white teeth. The one that can brighten a room. The one that I love to see, even if I never say it. Maybe he realizes it too, or maybe I pay far too much attention to him. Maybe I’m hopeless.

“Idiot,” I whisper, brushing aside his bangs when they fall over his eyes. I comb my fingers through his hair. He leans into the touch. Even in his sleep, he’s affectionate. I would laugh, but according to Aron, I’m apparently not much better.

I return to my work, that moves at a snail’s pace. It’s hard to focus even when we made up after a fight that Aron clearly didn’t understand. For the right reasons, he asked. Idiot. Of course, it’s for the right reasons. My future isn’t focused on my job. Not anymore. Now there’s a new element, one far more important than my job. He doesn’t get it. I don’t plan to explain it either. He has enough on his plate.

I toss my pen aside with a heavy sigh. My head hurts. My chest does too. I pinch the bridge of my nose, which does nothing. I’m just being moody, I guess. I’m tired. I’m stressed. So is he, so I won’t bother him. I let him sleep even if, in the back of my mind, I’m itching to talk to him. Doesn’t matter about what, could be anything. Could be about the weather or my so-called demonic nature, even about Northview, which continues to bother me.

Three hours is quite the distance and, yes, Aron is right. If he were anyone else, this would be easier. Not easy, but easier. I won't say that out loud. I refuse to. I've thrown Aron's fears back in his face before. I'll never do it again, or at least I'll try my best not to.

I'm fine with distance. I can work around it. I will work around it, but Aron will worry. He worries himself sick more times than not these days. Once he had endless energy. He would shout and run and childishly pester. Now he's tired and stressed and only a third of what he used to be so, yes, I'm fine. I'm fine doing a bit more work if it means giving Aron less. I'm fine with going to Monroeville. We'll see each other more often; something we both want, even if we don't always admit it. Aron won't stress over his supposed screw ups. He won't worry about the long distance or us drifting apart. Admittedly, neither will I. Everything will be easier. At least that's what I thought. At least, that's what I planned.

Aron is right. I could never argue that he wasn't. Northview offers opportunities that far surpass Monroeville. I may have longer in the field than expected, but...

I look back at Aron, breathing softly beneath the blankets.

"Why don't you get it?" I ask, as if I expect him to answer. The only answer I get is a soft snore.

I am not getting any work done. I set it aside to join Aron in bed. I'm careful and quiet when changing and slipping in beside him. Like all the nights before, Aron leans into me without question. I hold him without question. He buries his face in my chest and our legs tangle beneath the sheets.

"I love you, Aron," I whisper against his temple. He sleeps soundly in my arms.

Like this, I’m fine.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Aron

Somehow, the school dilemma resolved rather quickly afterwards. At least I think it did. Because Quinton admits he wants to attend Northview and my parents are all for it. He's talking to me again and not ignoring my calls. I think he's doing whatever he has to in order to attend Northview. He already got his acceptance letter, right? So, like, is that it?

I have no clue, but I trust he's doing what he wants. My parents attempt to interrogate me, hoping to decipher what the fight was about before, but I refuse. If Quinton doesn't want to bring it up to them, then that's his decision.

That doesn't mean all our issues are solved though because, damn it, he said when.

Why can't I stop thinking about this? We freaking talked at the park so you'd think I'd be ok but I'm not. Sometimes I wake up because I'm some type of disgusting romantic that had a dream about Quinton proposing and

me saying yes or my dumb ass stuttering a proposal that results with Quinton making this stupid smile that just makes me somehow love him more. Damn it, what's wrong with me?! Does this happen to everyone?

I glance at Quinton sleeping peacefully beside me.

No. Definitely not. There's no way he has similar dreams. He's probably imagining dissecting frogs or finding a cure for cancer, or creating a cancer so terrible it'll wipe out the human race in less than a year. Probably that.

I roll my eyes then myself, hoping to fall back to sleep, which only ends up working because Quinton's hand twists into my shirt. I smile when I feel his forehead press into the back of my neck. His hair tickles. He's breathing softly. There's no way he's even aware that he's curling closer to me. Not that I mind. It helps me fall back to sleep.

Time passes with further panic, though it diminishes, and suddenly December is upon us. How? When? Why?

I swear it was the start of my senior year yesterday, yet now it's finals week. Quinton is busy studying, so am I, but he has a thesis and I have all kinds of events to go to. There are dinners with members of the court, charity events and interviews. I'm exhausted, always. One thing piles on top of the other to where I'm rescheduling.

"The reading event with the children tomorrow has to be rescheduled," Haddie says from outside my dressing room. She's a new hire replacing my previous scheduler who took retirement.

I'm on a set of some talk show desperately trying to put on more suitable attire, since only thirty minutes ago I was running around a children's hospital in a Spiderman costume. Honestly, I would prefer to stay as Spiderman.

"Is the fifteenth ok?" Haddie asks.

“Is there an open slot?” I ask, voice muffled by my shirt.

“Yes. The fifteenth it is then. We’ll go to another school since your parents have the other day handled. Ah, this is perfect. We can fit this—”

And I stop listening after that. It’s fine, not like I’ll remember, anyway. That’s why Haddie is around, to remember all this stuff. Then the door opens. Some people rush in to touch up makeup or my clothes since, apparently, I can’t dress myself and I’m on TV again before I know it. Smiling at the bright lights pointed at me, I take a seat next to a host that I see at least three times a year. We talk about the holidays, politics, presents, a weird combination of stuff, then I pass out the moment I get home, completely dead to the world.

Being a prince is hard. Can I retire already?

“Rough day?”

I hum at the sound of a familiar voice. “Tired.”

“Obviously.” The bed dips.

I raise my head to find Quinton sitting on the edge. He looks just as tired with dark bags under his eyes. There’s a coffee on the nightstand, clearly his.

“You look like shit.” I laugh.

“Speak for yourself.”

“I want it to be winter break already.” I roll onto my back, lightly kicking Quinton’s thigh with my foot. “It’s the one time of the year that things really die down.”

“It’s almost here. You’ll live.”

“Thanks for the emotional support.”

Quinton shrugs, then asks, “Do you have a free day soon?”

“No.” I rub my palms into my eyes, growling softly at the exhaustion that’s slowly taking me. I don’t think I can talk much longer. “I have a schedule every day up to the twenty-third. Can you believe that shit?”

“Yes. It always happens.”

“Last year I was off on the twenty-first!”

“Sucks to be you.”

“Bastard,” I grumble, but that’s all I get out.

I hear Quinton chuckle, then my eyes feel so heavy that I can’t keep them open. I’m out a moment later, only waking later that night to find Quinton asleep with his arms wrapped tightly around me. His hair is a mess and when I see the discoloration beneath his eyes, it makes me frown. I wish he could get more rest. I wish we both could, but, well, at least he’s here. That’s good enough for me.

To be honest, the next few days are a blur. I’m either studying for finals, taking finals, or rushing around the city. I barely see Quinton, so we mostly text throughout the day. He has gotten little better at texting, so most of his responses are a word. Not even a few words, just one, like hn, idiot, or eh. You’d think I’d be mad except he responds quickly, which happens with only me, so ok I cut him some slack. He’s never been a great talker.

Not until today, anyway. I’m about to read some cheesy books about Santa to kids at school like I promised when Quinton messages me.

Quinton: You’re reading to the kids today, right?

Aron: Yep! Then having a talk with the school board about more funding for schools, probably won’t be home until late.

Quinton: Can’t grab dinner then?

Aron: Doubt it. Won’t be home til late and gotta get up early tomorrow.

I wait patiently for Quinton's response. Haddie calls for me, but Quinton is taking an unusually long time. When he answers, it's super simple.

Quinton: Ok, love you.

Aron: Love you too, good luck with your finals!!!!

It's not like Quinton messaging me is weird, but I get the feeling he wanted to ask me something. Too late now, though. The kids are calling for me and the paparazzi are ready.

I'm reading to them a moment later. They're clapping and giggling over the weird voices I use. A camera crew is nearby because all this must be documented otherwise, it didn't happen. I don't get it, but whatever. And I spend the whole day with a bunch of first graders, which I don't mind in the least. Quinton always said I had a useless amount of energy. Well, it's useful today!

Quinton isn't home when I get back, not that I'm surprised. He messages me later, around midnight, to tell me he won't be back until the weekend. He has a lot of work to do and I think nothing of it until two days later, when I'm on my way to yet another interview and Autumn calls.

"So what'd you two do for Quinton's birthday?" she asks immediately.

Something inside me cracks. Maybe Autumn heard the shattering or maybe I've been quiet for longer than I thought because the girl asks, "Hello? Aron, are you there?"

"Y-Yeah, I'm... I'm here."

The rescheduled plans. The fifteenth…Quinton's birthday.

His. Fucking. Birthday.

I missed it. I didn't inform Haddie when she got the job so she could mark it. I missed Quinton's birthday. Again. We didn't even make any plans!

Do you have a free day soon?

You’re reading to the kids today, right? Can’t grab dinner then?

Damn it, what’s wrong with me? That should have been a red flag. I should have known. What a fucking idiot! He was trying to bring up his birthday, except Quinton isn’t like me. He doesn’t announce his birthday to the world or even expects anyone to show up. But I should have. I should have known and showed up. What is wrong with me?

“Quinton said you were busy on his birthday. We all went out to get dinner.”

A dinner he wanted to invite me to, and I shot it down before he could even try.

“So you had to make plans for another day.”

Which he clearly said so no one would bombard me with texts about missing his birthday, though I wish they had! Even if I showed up late, at least I would be there!

“Please tell me someone proposed or you’ve made plans to do so. We’re all tired of waiting.” Autumn laughs, completely oblivious to my absolute horror and panic, at least for a moment. When she doesn’t hear me laugh or shout at her for what she said, she asks, “Hey, are you ok? Did I call at a bad time?”

I need to hang up. I have to call Quinton right now.

“Aron, you...you guys made plans, right?” She asks. Her tone is soft, telling me she isn’t attacking me for forgetting, but I can hear the disappointment she’s trying to hide. If she’s disappointed, then how must Quinton feel?

“If not, we all know you’re busy. Finals are over, so now is better, anyway.” She’s just trying to make me feel better. It isn’t working.

“I have to go,” I say before hanging up.

Autumn probably had more to say. Maybe she could help, but I'm not even thinking about it.

Jeremy raises a brow in the rearview mirror. "Is everything alright, Your Highness?"

"I...I'm fine. Could you give me some privacy?"

Jeremy nods.

The tinted window rises between us, allowing me to quickly call Quinton. I'm practically biting through my lip while listening to the rings. Holy shit, I can't believe I forgot his birthday. Again. It's happened twice now. The first time was kind of funny. We joked about becoming adults and becoming forgetful, so we laughed it off, but now I'm in pure fucking panic. Because all this keeps adding up. One time after the other I disappoint Quinton even if he always claims it doesn't, but this time is different. I can feel it when he answers quietly.

"Hello," he practically whispers; not a snappy response or even telling me to hang up. A hello, which most expect in a phone call, but not me.

My stomach churns when I sputter out, "Ha... happy birthday."

At least he chuckles. "Thanks."

Then there's silence; a silence that's eating away at my gut until I'm pretty sure it's gone and now my heart is about to follow. I will soon be nothing but an Aron husk and I'm kinda ok with that. A husk might be an improvement than this pathetic excuse of a person. Why am I so utterly worthless? Why can't I keep my promises to anyone and do something right?

Tears build in my eyes that I try to wipe away. "I'm so—"

"Will you be home late tonight too?" Quinton interrupts and I'm sure it's because he doesn't want to hear an apology.

“Yeah, but we can...we can go eat somewhere. I’ll ask Andy to make reservations.”

“You don’t have to get up early tomorrow?”

I swear there’s a tone of annoyance. I don’t blame him, even if part of me is shouting that he should have said something, too. But I don’t want to pass the blame on him, especially when he puts up with so much already. I’m such a screwup. How could I let this happen? I really am an idiot.

“I do, but we can go. I want to go.”

Quinton hums. “Ok, let me know where and when later.”

The window rolls down enough for Jeremy to say, “We’ve almost arrived, Your Highness.”

“Thanks, Jeremy!” I call before focusing back on Quinton. “Listen, Quinton, I’m really—”

“No apologies,” Quinton says. “None tonight either.”

“But—”

“Let’s just have a nice dinner, ok?” He sounds so exhausted. I feel so exhausted.

The car comes to a stop. Jeremy’s car door opens.

“I’ll see you tonight then,” I mumble, glancing at the car door when Jeremy is about to open it.

“Alright... I love you, Aron.” He’s been saying that more and I hope that’s a good sign.

“I love you too.”

Quinton hangs up, and Jeremy opens the door. There’s flashing lights from cameras everywhere. I’m almost thankful since I have an excuse to wear sunglasses, which hide the sorrow in my eyes while I force my best smile. I have to. It doesn’t matter what is happening to Aron. Right now,

he’s the prince, so put on a brave face and do your job. Don’t be a disappointment. Do better. You have to.

But, damn it, I’m so fucking tired.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

After my colossal screw up, there is only one choice; I must woo Quinton, and wooing the most un-wooable person in the history of wooing is a feat I am uncertain I can accomplish, but I must try. And so, I come up with a plan and execute it as swiftly as I can while Andy makes reservations at a nice restaurant that I've been to with Quinton on multiple occasions; has a really calm atmosphere with private rooms.

Quinton is already there when I arrive later that evening. He sits at the table in a nice blue button-down shirt and jeans, somehow looking nicer than most men look in a suit. I want to roll my eyes. Scratch that, I do roll my eyes.

Quinton sits the menu aside when I walk in. There's silence all the way to me taking an awkward seat across from him, quickly clearing my throat.

Quinton holds up his hand and says, "No apologies."

“I know, I know,” I grumble, picking up the menu to hide my embarrassment and guilt. Quinton snorts so I know he isn’t furious, but he has to be annoyed.

“Always so childish,” he teases.

“How am I childish?”

“How can you ask that while hiding behind a menu?”

“It’s a perfectly normal thing to do. I have to read the menu to see what I want, don’t I?!” I shout, throwing the menu down only to flush at the quiet stare Quinton is giving me. I want to ask how he can smile like that even after I’ve messed up again, but I don’t want that smile to leave so I end up squirming in place.

Quinton has his head rested in his hand, elbow pressed to the table while his eyes fall half mast. It shouldn’t be allowed. I’m half tempted to pass a law later to insist it isn’t, although I do not know how that’ll be written. I’ll have to start practicing.

“If you need the menu to be that close in order to read, you should probably get your eyes checked,” he says.

“Shut up,” I hiss, jumping when the waiter suddenly steps into the room with a warm smile. He asks us what we’d like to drink and I realize then that Quinton can drink.

“Finally!” I shout, throwing my hands in the air. “We can order wine!”

“You don’t even like wine.”

“You’ll have your first drink with me.” My jaw drops. “This is a big moment.” I point at the waiter and say what I’ve always wanted to say, “Bring us your finest wine!”

The waiter chuckles and promises to do so, leaving only after checking Quinton’s I.D. I grin from ear to ear, watching Quinton as he leans back into

his chair, arms crossed.

“You realize we’ve had drinks before?” Quinton asks. “This isn’t, as you put it, a big moment.”

“Dad let us try but it’s always been at home. This is the first time we can order one. It’s big!”

“Hn.”

“Quinton!”

“Idiot.”

I purse my lips. “Fine, be like that.”

Doesn’t matter if he doesn’t get it. I get it and this is a big moment. Finally, we can share something together, as silly as it is. Besides, wine makes dinner romantic, right? That’s a thing, like, in the movies and shit. Wine helps the mood, eases the nerves, woo’s people. Usually there are flowers involved too, but the one time I tried to get Quinton flowers he looked me dead in the eyes and said, “Why would you get me something that just creates a mess?”

Leave it to Quinton to ruin the thought of gifting flowers. Hey, maybe I should get plastic ones? They won’t wilt so it won’t make a mess! Wow, I’m a genius. I swiftly send a text to Andy beneath the table.

Ok, enough about flowers!

“How’s everything with Northview?” I ask, pressing my arms to the table and leaning forward. “You’re already accepted, right?”

“Of course.”

I roll my eyes but can’t hold back the smile.

“There’s just some paperwork. I’ll be starting in the summer.”

“The summer?” I ask with a scowl. “Why not August like everyone else?”

“There’s a lab taking place this summer I wish to take part in, and I was invited. Better to start early.”

“I think you should take a break,” I argue with a shake of my head. “My senior year is tough, which means yours is hell.”

“You should take your own advice.”

I roll my eyes.

“Besides, I’ll have a two-week break.” Quinton shrugs like it’s no big deal. To him, it may not be, but eventually even he’ll run out of steam. “It’ll be fine.”

I purse my lips, eyeing Quinton suspiciously. “If you end up having to take a semester off later because of burn out I will never let you live it down.”

“You don’t need to tell me that. I’m already aware.”

The waiter returns with our wine and appetizers. Sure enough, I’m not a fan of the wine, but it doesn’t matter. I’m just happy to be here toasting with Quinton on his twenty-first birthday. I’m happy that we have this moment, even if it isn’t something everyone would see as a big deal. I’m happy that maybe I’ve made missing his birthday up to him—or have the chance to, seeing as I have further plans for this evening—although I’m worried over what will happen later.

“Quinton,” I call after our meal is brought out. He’s cutting into his steak and taking a bite, humming to show he has heard me. When his eyes meet mine, he must know I’m getting serious. Unlike him, my heart is on my sleeve. I doubt I could hide anything from him, freaking jackass still hasn’t taught me his secrets.

“Um... listen, I know that I’ve been fucking up a lot.”

“Aron, we agreed. No apologies.”

“I’m not, just, I’m asking if you could... if, ah,” I scratch at the back of my neck, unsure how to phrase this. “I want you to be honest with me.”

Quinton is confused. He easily shows this with his furrowed brows.

“What I mean is, I want you to tell me if you’re bothered or annoyed or if I’ve done something stupid. You do it so easily for practically everything but situations like this. I know it’s my fault too, always being so busy and not being as attentive to everything. I’m going to work on it too, I promise! But I don’t want you to accept how things are because you think you have to. I want to fix this. I know I can’t always fix everything, but I want to at least try. Know what I mean?”

I hope he knows what I mean because I honestly don’t have a damn clue how else I could say that. I don’t even know what I said, but hey, when do I ever? Thankfully, it appears Quinton has gotten the hint.

“I know you don’t mean for things to be as they are,” he says, but I can still sense that annoyance in his tone. The annoyance he tries so hard to hold back and I rather he does not because eventually it’ll boil over and I fear what will happen when it does. “I trust that we’ll both work on it and, hopefully, you can work on how to give a better speech. I’m honestly impressed with how you’ve got even worse over the years.”

“Hey!”

“If I didn’t know you so well, I wouldn’t have understood any of the shit that just came out of your mouth.”

“Quinny, I’m being serious!”

“That’s a sad thought.”

But Quinton smiles, and that’s comforting to see; that we can still smile and laugh and joke around like we used to, even through the bad and the screw ups. It’s relieving because my nerves have been eating away at me so

much lately that I'm forgetting what it's like not to be constantly trying. Trying to do best, trying to impress, trying to be as proud and strong as my father, trying to prove myself worthy of being king and living up to all that I've promised. It's tiring, but also rewarding in a sick sort of way. Perhaps I've actually gone crazy while being with Quinton, or crazier. One can easily argue I was strange before Quinton.

"Since I'll be off soon, let's make plans," I suggest, even if I always mess it up. I said I'd try, so I'm going to. I'll make a hundred and one alarms on my phone so I can't even attempt to forget!

"Plans for what?"

"See a play or a concert or something? There's bound to be tickets we can get for something."

"Andy hates short notice plans."

I wave my hand dismissively. "He'll get over it. Besides, he should assume we'll be busy because it's Christmas time."

"It will have to be before the second week of January. I'm visiting my mother," Quinton reminds me, which is yet another stab to the gut.

I've missed visiting with him quite a few times when we've made plans. I don't think I've seen her since... last year? And in that instance, she came to visit us since we couldn't make it to her. It's nice that they see each other from time to time, but she certainly doesn't make herself known. Can't really blame her. She and Quinton were in the spotlight once. It's obvious how anxious it makes her, so it's always best if Quinton visits some place quiet.

The spotlight takes its toll on Quinton too. He definitely doesn't have any form of social media. We both can imagine what sort of messages he'd get, and he rarely watches TV. Any form of political commentary that isn't

serious, he’s not interested. Good thing too. I’ve seen plenty of garbage continuing to poke fun at us.

“Make sure to ask your mom again if she’d ever like to visit. I know she doesn’t like the spotlight, but she needs to at least know she’s welcome,” I say, to which Quinton nods.

“Ah, we have the annual Christmas ball coming up, too.” I gnaw on my fork while Quinton scrapes against his plate. I would laugh, but we both hate that damn ball even if my folks are the ones that hold it. It’s more of a political gathering than a Christmas party, which sucks.

“Why did you bring that up?” He hisses. I see a vein already throbbing in his neck.

“Because it’s true. We’ll have to make plans around it.”

Quinton mutters something about “annoying old geezers” under his breath that I snicker at. Although I didn’t hear everything he said, I can make an educated guess! It has to do with his distaste for members of the court, which is understandable. They aren’t exactly keen on the idea of Quinton being anywhere near the throne and, oh boy, do they make sure he knows it.

But I can’t deny that it’s a little fun watching their interactions because Quinton is a grade A bitch and ain’t nobody messin’ with him without regretting it immediately. What can I say? I like them...bitchy? Fuck if I know, but the interactions are funny. For me.

“It should be better this year. I’m inviting Autumn, Dahlton.”

Quinton snorts.

“Langley, Ariel, Nora, and Cassidy, so everyone will be there!” I throw my hands up in excitement, forgetting I also had my fork. It goes flying only to land in Quinton’s glass with a loud splash.

“Goal!” I scream with excitement. Quinton rolls his eyes and cleans the mess made with a napkin.

“Childish.”

“Come on, that was the trick shot of the century.”

“If you wish to make another, then do so in your own drink.” Quinton takes the fork out, holding it like it has a disease before tossing it at me. I yelp, narrowly missing the drenched utensil.

“And you call me childish,” I grunt.

“If I ever act childishly, it was learned from you.”

“If by childishly you mean awesome, when you act awesome, it’s from me.”

“I’m shocked you could fit through the door with an ego that large.”

“That’s rich coming from you.”

Quinton smirks. I think my plan of wooing is working.

When dinner ends and we step into the car, Quinton grows confused. I smile while he glances out the window, noticing that we’re heading in the opposite direction of the castle. Jeremy has the glass up, giving us privacy while also avoiding any flirting that will go down. Poor guy has seen that a lot. By now, the glass is more for his privacy than ours!

“Where are we going?” Quinton asks.

“Your place.”

“Why?”

I shrug, smirking at his suspicious gaze. “I don’t know.”

“Aron.”

Quinton isn’t always the best with surprises and based on his tone, he is likely assuming I am doing my best to apologize, which is slightly true. I am apologizing, but I also just want to do something nice for his birthday.

Quinton has done so for me, making sure that I don't forget, throwing a party and inviting all our friends. He doesn't do that out of obligation, and neither am I.

"I thought it'd be nice if it was just us," I explain, taking hold of his hand. His fingers slip between my own.

"Technically, there are guards right outside the apartment door, so—"

I silence him with a kiss.

"Don't get technical with me," I say. "Just be happy I am gracing you with my presence this evening."

Quinton rolls his eyes, but there's no denying his soft smile. And he doesn't bother hiding it either. Somehow, I never get used to it.

"Don't you have to get up early?" he asks.

"Yeah, why? Do you have plans to keep me up all night?"

"Considering you're the one that wants alone time, I believe it's you that has those plans."

"I guess we'll see."

I tug Quinton closer. He leans away. I repeat the action over and over until he finally scoots next to me. I'm resting my head on his shoulder for the rest of the drive, enjoying the warmth and the touch of his cheek against my temple. I wish times like this lasted forever; as simple as they are, I can never get enough of them.

It's late when we get to Quinton's. I do have to get up early, but exhaustion has yet to settle in. I'm swaying anxiously once at Quinton's door. He slowly opens said door, smiling smugly when I groan, "Quinton, hurry it up!"

He knows I love showing off my hard work. I deserve some praise!

Finally, Quinton opens the door and we step inside, kicking off our shoes before entering the apartment. I'm rocking on the balls of my feet and grinning victoriously when Quinton laughs upon seeing my absolutely shit attempt at birthday decorations.

There are animal balloons floating haphazardly across the ceiling, along with taped up ribbons in the shapes of scissors and pencils. Atop the island in the kitchen are Christmas baskets because that's all the store had, filled with silver tinsel that holds an arrangement of pens, markers, tablets, fancy calculators and childish science equipment, like make your own slime kits. None of it is really of any use to Quinton, yet he's smiling with this sort of sparkle in his eye that makes my toes curl. Andy even found some plastic black roses that are wrapped in crimson tissue paper. Quinton notices them almost immediately. When he picks them up, he peers back at me with a wide but confused grin.

"Plastic flowers?" he asks between his chuckles.

"You said flowers make a mess, but those won't and they're as black as your soul, so you can't throw them away." I hold my hands behind my back nervously and ask, "Do you like it?"

Quinton walks around the island, inspecting the toys within.

"I've seen better," he says, throwing me that precious smile that has yet to leave since he stepped through the door.

My heart is hammering so loud I can't even think. That isn't unusual but, fuck, I actually think the woo was successful.

"Oh, and, uh," I rush to the fridge to pull out the last item. "I got a cake, but they only had Christmas one's left."

Quinton shakes his head at the red, white, and green cake that obviously reads, Happy Holidays! Except I got red icing to cross out holidays and put

Birthday. The writing is absolutely terrible and shaky as hell, but I did my best!

Hearing his continued laughter brings a blush to my face. When Quinton looks at me, I know that he's feeling a thousand times better. He may not wear his heart on his sleeve like I do, but even he cannot hide his joy right now. I'm not entirely sure he wants to.

"You're such a…"

"Genius?" I grin.

"An idiot," he supposedly corrects me, but there is only love in his voice.

He takes the cake to sit it aside along the flowers on the kitchen counter. I'm about to ask if he wants to eat cake first or make some of that damn slime, but never get the chance. And I sure as hell ain't complaining about that.

Quinton wraps his arms around my shoulders to pull me in close as he hungrily kisses me. I grunt when my back hits the counter. Quinton's feverish touch quickly overshadowed the pain. My hands fall to his eager hips, rocking against mine. His fingers are in my hair, tongue slipping past my lips, then retreating in a quiet request. I'm more than happy to oblige, swiping my tongue through his mouth to elicit a low groan from the back of his throat.

The woo was definitely successful because it doesn't even seem like we're using rock, paper, scissors tonight! Of course, I'd be happy with such results either way, but it's always nice when Quinton hands over the reins without a fight.

We barely break apart as I lead us away from the kitchen. We never make it to the bedroom, though. Quinton's back hits the couch; holding himself up on his elbows while I kneel between his parted thighs. He's working on

unbuttoning my pants as I throw my shirt across the room before diving back in for another kiss. His body is warm and enticing. I can never get enough of feeling his skin trembling beneath my fingers when I lightly trail them up his shirt. Further and further until the cloth curls under his arms, leaving his chest exposed. We're both breathing heavy, curled together half naked on the couch that begins to slide and creak with the continuous rocking of our hips.

We're definitely staying up late. I'm pent up, reeling, hot and bothered and more aroused than I have been in weeks. Combine that with the joy of making Quinton feel better, I'm on cloud fucking nine and don't plan on returning any time soon!

Quinton doesn't seem any different. Normally I'm the one moaning pathetically before we even start, but right now Quinton is groaning when my hand so much as grazes his nipple. Taking this rare opportunity, I continue the exploration of his chest, tweaking the perked nubs between my fingers. Quinton pants into my mouth, his kissing growing more rough and erratic. Not that I'm any better. I'm grinding my erection into Quinton's thigh that is as eager to please as my own is. I feel his own arousal beneath his pants, pressed firmly against me.

"Fuck, Quinton, you have lube here, right?" I ask breathlessly, marking his chest before taking his nipple between my teeth. He grunts in response, pressing his hands to my back as I flick my tongue against the hardened nub.

There's no answer at first as I continue to assault his chest until he's littered with kiss marks. He only responds after my hand dives south, fondling him atop his pants. Quinton thrusts into my hand, answering breathlessly, "Bedroom. Last drawer."

How the hell does he not stutter at a time like this? I bite his nipple for it. He hisses and tugs on my hair in warning, not that I am worried we're going to stop; especially when I rush to the bedroom and glance back to find Quinton eagerly removing his pants. My own are soon to follow, dropping around my ankles to be kicked to the ends of the universe, likely getting lost with all those socks stolen by the sock goblins (they're totally real!)

I dig through the last drawer, finding what I'm looking for, taking the lube and condoms with me. My boxers are left in the bedroom as well. Quinton waits on the couch, his own clothes crumbled up on the floor. A couch pillow is now situated under his hips. I'd say something about his more than willing participation, but I would jump out the damn window if Quinton stopped.

Instead, I quickly retake my position between his parted thighs. We both moan when our bodies reunite, skin against flushed skin. The heat between us builds when we continue from where we left off, moving against one another as Quinton's dull nails dig into my back. I grind his hips into the couch, overstimulated by his hot breath and pleasured moans whispered against my burning ears. My hands explore his trembling thighs, taking a firm hold to bring our central heat roughly together.

Quinton's nails pierce the skin of my hips, grunting at the first touch of my coated finger inside him. Unlike me, it took Quinton much longer to get used to this part. Sometimes he was fine with it, while there were plenty more instances when he prepared himself before I arrived. I never asked why since I could take a guess based on how he reacted when I got away with it; hiding behind his arms or looking away in embarrassment, like he thought I'd hold it against him that he enjoyed this. Which is a fucking

ridiculous thought, considering the way I act. And let's face it, teasing him is not worth risking losing these moments. An aroused Quinton is not something I'm willing to give up.

Besides, I want to be the one that makes him feel good. I want him to be comfortable and know that there's no need to be embarrassed or to silence the soft moans that occasionally pass his parted lips. Every moan, every curse, every grunt and movement of his hips turns me on even more. It's somehow as good as him touching me. There's really nothing about him that doesn't drive me wild. I'd say that's sad, but I find it safe to say the feeling is mutual.

I kiss down his heaving chest, soon reaching my destination. Quinton groans when I take his cock between my lips, slowly sucking him off. His fingers twist into my hair, voice becoming a raspy plea for more. Quinton can't seem to decide if he wishes to grind against my inquisitive fingers or thrust into my eager mouth. He's a panting mess when his back suddenly arches off the couch after I press my fingers deep, and it has him biting his lip to hold back a cry. Now he's definitely moving to the rhythm of my fingers.

When Quinton reaches back to take hold of the arm of the couch, I know that he's ready before he even looks at me. His dark brown eyes are filled with lust that only entices me to give him everything he wants. I suck on his tip one last time, curling my fingers to elicit a surprised curse, then I retreat to put on the condom in record time.

Quinton breathes slowly, relaxing himself. He presses his heels into the couch and keeps his legs parted for me. I'm leaning over him, one hand pressing back on his leg and the other grips the base of my cock to brush my tip against his quivering entrance. Quinton grunts, eyes squinting shut at

the intrusion. He shakes when I push further until I'm completely overtaken by his heat that leaves me dizzy and craving me.

It's crazy how similar, yet oddly different, this pleasure is. When Quinton does this to me, I'm incapable of moving or feeling anything other than the desire of being filled more. Yet as I pant over Quinton's form, his tight heat encasing me to the hilt, I'm the complete opposite. I want to move and want to fill and want to keep going, even when the pleasure builds to the point that it hurts.

I lean forward to kiss Quinton, feeling his soft breaths that even out until he moves his hips against mine. The moment he does so, I take that as permission and pull out, only to slam back in. Quinton actually cries out, gasping for breath as the couch creaks across the floor. It continues to do so after my pace quickens, keeping at a quick and rough speed that leaves the both of us cursing and gasping for air.

Quinton moans beautifully beneath me and thrusts his hips desperately to meet my own. He bites his lip again, the pleasure clearly overtaking him as his cheeks flush a furious red. I'm quick to react, getting to my knees and lifting Quinton's hips up to slam against my own. He can't keep back the moan; back bowing when he cries out my name after every hit to his prostate.

"Aron, ahh, fuck, Aron!"

My ears are burning. I want to hear more. All the pleasure is settling into my gut. Quinton's voice and his touch and his body tightening around me to the point of suffocating are too much. I drop to my elbows, my thrusts growing more desperate when white lines my vision. Quinton is no better judging by how quick he pulls me in for a kiss. Every moan is felt on my

lips, followed by his own arousal rubbing against my stomach. I reach between us to take hold of it.

Quinton grunts. His body shakes terribly. He tightens, and that's when I lose it. My body stills, hips pressed firmly against Quinton when my orgasm rocks me. Quinton continues kissing me, his hips rolling with obvious need. I'm still pumping his shaft desperately, forcing my tongue past his swollen lips to feel every soft moan uttered against me. It doesn't take long for Quinton to follow. He shivers and moans incoherently when his orgasm finally hits. His nails pierce the skin of my shoulders as he arches off the couch, groaning deeply, then dropping afterwards, completely spent and breathing heavy.

I'm not any better, resting atop him regardless of the mess. His arm is draped over me, the other languidly hanging off the couch along with one of his legs. It's hot and stuffy and crowded, yet even if we're in a wide bed or on a small couch, this part always happens. The part afterwards where we're just close and basking in the afterglow; when Quinton runs his fingers through my hair and I'm kissing his neck like I somehow didn't get enough of it during sex. I clearly did, based on the multitude of marks that are already darkening.

"Is this a good time to say happy birthday?" I ask.

Quinton snorts. His voice is hoarse when he says, "Don't ruin the moment, idiot."

I kiss his chest, then his neck, then his bruised lips. His fingers curl into my hair when I say, "I don't have to leave until seven."

"What time is it?"

I glance back into the kitchen to check the time on the microwave. Grinning, I answer, "It's barely midnight."

Quinton smiles.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Making up with Quinton leaves a skip in my step the following day, even if I only got about four hours of sleep. It was worth it! Of course, that doesn't mean I want it to happen again, the forgetting his birthday part, not the sex part. Clearly I want that to always happen, otherwise I may go through withdrawal.

Succeeding in wooing Quinton at least brings back my usual bouncing energy. I can get my work done and having enough to spare to do some Christmas wrapping that evening with Autumn, Langley, and Nora. We're all in the lounge with our presents, save for what we got for each other, obviously. I am pleased to say Nora is as shit at wrapping presents as I am. Autumn and Langley are basically our supervisors, smacking us when we attempt to wrap a present wrong.

I can't help that I'm no good at wrapping! I always misjudge where to cut. The maids used to do this for me, but Autumn strongly suggested—more

like forced—we do it ourselves. She claimed the presents mean more, which makes no sense. We're going to tear into them on Christmas morning, so why does it matter?! But whatever, it's fun sitting here with them until Langley opens his stupid face; "How did things go with Quinton?"

I hate my face for blushing without my consent. And I hate Nora for giggling and Autumn for snickering.

"I am saying it went well based on that blush!" Autumn points accusingly at me. "Some serious sex happened, I bet. Is that why you're wearing a turtleneck?"

Yes, yes, it is. Quinton was overzealous with his kiss marks, though I wasn't any better but whatever! We're allowed, we're dating, and it was his belated birthday!

"Make up sex." Langley nods approvingly. "Nice, dude."

I push Langley aside with a growl, "Shut up! We had dinner, ok? And I even got him flowers!"

Nora full on howls with laughter while Autumn asks, "And he still fucked you? Quinton hates flowers!"

"First of all," I throw an empty tape dispenser at Autumn, which she dodges. "I did the fucking, thank you very much."

Nora's face grows vibrant red. She can handle so much discussion about sex before she hides. She has gotten to the hiding behind her hands phase while Autumn eagerly nods, always happy to hear gossip. Langley, well, he still thinks the rules apply and is now holding out his hand for five dollars, which is ignored.

"Second of all, I got him black plastic roses, which won't make a mess and are rather fitting, don't you think?" I grin with obvious triumph.

“Impressive,” Autumn says. “You’re getting better at kissing ass.”

“Or licking ass,” Langley whispers. Autumn leans over to give him a high five while I smack both of them over the head. They yelp.

“You’re both too interested in our sex life,” I say.

Autumn is quick to argue. “You’re the one that makes it obvious. Learn to control your blush.” She pinches my cheek. “And don’t answer us if you don’t want us to talk about it. How often do you hear us bringing up our sex lives?”

I go to answer only to realize it rarely happens. Then I glare at all of them, including Nora, who is now clearing her throat and squirming in place.

“Whatever,” I eventually huff. “I won’t say anymore then.”

Langley snorts. “We’ll see about that.”

I’m about to deck this bitch.

“Change of topic,” I say, finishing up the last of my presents. “You’re all attending the annual Christmas ball, right?”

“You know I have to,” Langley responds with a drawn-out groan. He leans back, pressing his hands into the carpet to keep himself up. “Gotta keep face with all the politicians, same as you, but not nearly as severe, thankfully.”

“Yes, yes, rub it in, pal.”

Langley swings a few finger guns my way.

“Is it really ok if we attend?” Nora asks nervously. “It’s not really a place for commoners.”

“It’s for anyone invited!” I quickly argue. “And you’re invited, so of course it’s ok, if you want to go. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

Langley leans over to whisper, “This is his way of trying to talk you into going.”

Nora smiles while I glare at the rotten bastard that is having way too much fun teasing me this evening. I kick him in the shin for it and relish in the immediate howl of pain that follows. Of course, he kicks me back and this childish kicking continues until Autumn says, “We’re all going to attend, Aron, don’t worry.”

She, too, has finished with her Christmas wrapping. There’s a nice sized pile of gifts beside her. “Free food and drinks are things I simply cannot pass up,” she adds.

“Here, here!” Langley cheers and, ok, I cheer too because, same.

“Since we’re all gracing you with our presence, though, please tell me you’re going to give the court members a good lecturing this year,” Autumn says, frowning at the immediate tension in my shoulders. “Aron, you will not let them continue pushing you around, are you?”

“T-They don’t push me around!” Damn, why did I stutter?! That doesn’t sound believable at all! And Autumn shows it too, with clear disbelief etched into her brown eyes. Langley is the same, shaking his head beside me. At least Nora is on my side, kind of. She isn’t saying anything, but her apologetic smile states she knows that Autumn is right.

I groan. “I don’t mean to let them push me around. I just... ugh, everything I do pisses them off. I bet I could create time travel and they’d still complain about me.”

“Your dad went through the same thing when he was younger,” says Langley with a wide grin. “Although for different reasons.”

“Very different. You can’t imagine how open they are about their distaste for Quinton and me, makes me want to pass a law to allow beheadings again.”

Nora scoots closer to pat my knee. “Don’t listen to them, Aron. Some are hard on you because they believe in you, and others are just jerks.”

“Massive dickwads to make up for what they likely lack,” Autumn tacks on, giving me a playful wink that I snicker at.

“I know, I know. They’re my main problem.” I throw my head in my hands when thinking of all the times I’ve screwed up simply because I want to please them, because I want to live up to my father’s rule.

They’re members of the court, people I’ll be working with for a long time. I have expectations, ridiculously high expectations to meet. My dad is great and I’m lacking in many, many ways. Too many to count that it makes me question if I’ll ever be anything more than what I am, if I can ever be the king our country needs and deserves. When they look at me with disdain and disbelief, I don’t know what to do. I panic! I act like a chicken with its head cut off, simply running around endlessly. Even if, in the back of my mind, I know it’s dumb and pointless; I try, and try again no matter how much it hurts.

“We’ll do our best to protect you, then.” Autumn gives me a thumbs up. “Stick with us. They’re less likely to talk shit with commoners around to trash talk them later.”

“I didn’t think about that.” I grin. “Maybe you really are my savior.”

“Maybe? You mean obviously! Besides, I’d love to see Quinton give them a nice ass kicking.”

“He has such a way with words,” Langley says, acting like a swooning fan boy that has me rolling my eyes.

“I suppose having him around is helpful. He’s better at handling them than me.” I poke at the finished presents, a bit saddened by that fact. If I want to help Quinton, if I want to protect him from all those jerks and the

media, then shouldn't I be getting better at handling it? Yet I feel as if I'm getting worse.

There's a knock at the door, followed by Kingsley stepping in. Smiling, he says, "Your Highness, Miss Coralline is here."

He steps aside to show Willow, which has me frowning, except it has nothing to do with her. She must be able to read minds, or she knows me that well, because she quickly giggles, "Don't worry, my dad is downstairs with a few other boring politicals. They won't be bothering us."

Langley slaps his hands together and shouts, "Sweet cheese and biscuits, thank you!"

I'm quick to gesture for her to take a seat. "Ah, we're wrapping Christmas presents."

"I can see that." She sits next to Nora with a bright smile.

Willow is the only Coralline I can stand. About a year after we had our little talk, Willow started dating. She only recently found a guy that she claims to really like; a young law student named Jimmy. I've met him a few times. He seems like a super nice guy that treats her well. I'm relieved that she broke free from her own expectations, too. Because of that, I'd say we're friends now.

"I hope I'm not interrupting though," she adds. "I just didn't want to walk around with them all afternoon."

"What are they doing here?" I ask.

"Planning for the Christmas ball. Guess a lot of foreign ambassadors and such are coming this year, so everyone wants to have a say in something." Willow waves her hand dismissively. "It's a bore and the old dudes always try to set me up with their sons."

I hold out my hand for her, which she takes. She laughs heartily when I pat the back of her hand and say, “I feel your pain. I’ve been nearly set up with every court member’s daughter, even after openly dating Quinton. Most of the girl’s names I don’t even know.”

“Me either.” Willow helps Nora with her wrapping. She’s surprisingly good at it. “You’d think by now they’d know to at least let us meet before trying to wed us together. Give us their number. It’s the 21st century!”

Autumn shakes her head with a click of her tongue. “Wow, rich people’s problems are so fascinating to listen to.”

Langley nearly hacks up a lung from laughter while I give Autumn a glare. She shrugs, adding, “My family is well off, but we don’t have any issues with trying to continue the family lineage by making sure our babies have good genes. Not sure how money has to do with good genes, but whatever.”

“Speaking of marriage!” Willow squeals suddenly. “When’s the wedding?”

“What wedding?” I ask, blushing up to my ears.

Willow’s eyes widen. She peers about the room, meeting Autumn’s quiet gaze for a second, then facing me with a wide smile, “There're all kinds of articles discussing whether you and Quinton will wed so,” she shrugs. “I thought it was going to be announced soon.”

“A-Announced soon!?” I sputter, crumbling up the leftover wrapping paper into a giant ball. I send that ball straight into Langley’s face because he’s snickering. He shouts then throws it back but misses terribly.

“We aren’t getting married,” I say, shaking my head.

“Not yet,” Langley adds.

“Shut up!” I go to kick him, but he smacks my leg away so, like a complete adult, I stick my tongue out at him. He happily does the same.

“They have talked about it though,” Nora whispers, which has Willow shaking her hands gleefully.

“I can’t wait for the wedding!” She squeals so loudly that my ear pops.

“Willow,” I hiss. “Keep this up and I won’t invite you.”

“Implying that there will be a wedding?” She winks. “Ok, ok. Listen, none of us are trying to pressure you.”

“Seems like pressure to me.”

Willow ignores me to go on and say, “But we’re all supporting you and obviously want an excuse to have a giant royal wedding. Besides, what better way to stick it to those rotten court members than to make them go to your wedding?” Willow grins. “They’d have to congratulate you both. Oh, it would be a blessed day, truly. I will record it.”

“It would be fun to see the complete horror on all their faces,” Autumn adds with a firm nod. “The biggest fuck you in history.”

I hold up my hand when saying, “I don’t think that’s a good reason to get married.”

“Of course, of course, but it’s a perk!” Autumn tosses the last of her presents into a pile. She’s all finished. Now Nora and Langley are too after another minute or so.

“Not to turn this serious,” I interject, looking at Willow. Her face falls, as if she knows what I’m about to ask. “But have your parents... said anything?”

“About?”

“Anything to do with me.”

Willow shakes her head with a heavy sigh. “They don’t say much because they know I don’t agree with what they’re doing. Last I heard, they were still looking into how to lawfully dethrone you, but I haven’t gotten word if they’ve found anything concrete. Sorry, Aron.”

“It’s alright.” I sigh. “At least I know and can prepare for whenever they decide to attack.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The annual Christmas ball typically takes place the weekend before Christmas. This year, it's a mere five days after Quinton's birthday. Once more we find ourselves dressed to impress; tuxedo's, slicked back hair and too much cologne with a touch of makeup because, apparently, everything can be seen on camera. Quinton has never enjoyed it, claiming that it makes him more self conscious because he keeps thinking he can't touch his face, which makes him want to touch it more. For once, we share that irrational thought or maybe it is rational, who knows! Either way, Quinton hates we think the same because it's oh so terrible to think similarly to me. Freaking jackass.

Quinton is on the phone with someone named Dom, I think? Guess they met at Northview when he visited. I don't understand half the shit they're saying, something to do with school and the grad program. Why they have

to talk now during Christmas break, don't have a clue, but anything overachievers like Quinton do is beyond me.

"Hurry it up or we'll be late," I say while adjusting my tie.

Mom doesn't like when I loosen it so I had to wait until she left us alone to do so. I can't help it! Feels suffocating. If it were up to me, I'd go full crazy mode, not wearing a tie and have my cheetah print shirt half unbuttoned. Pretty sure it wouldn't be just Mom that killed me though. Quinton would join in on the fun, for sure.

"Nothing wrong with being late," Quinton replies, but hangs up a second after.

"I don't want to go either, but you know what will happen if we're even a second late."

Quinton grunts.

"You know, I'm starting to think we've switched." I gesture between us with a grin. "You're the one childishly avoiding everything and I'm nagging you to get your ass down there."

"Suppose I've spent too much time with you. I'll make plans to fix that."

I snort and hold out my hand. "Bullshit."

Quinton wraps his hand around mine as we head to the ballroom. We already hear the music carrying softly through the busy halls. The castle is in a complete uproar, busy behind the scenes but serene in the ballroom. Quinton and I are with my parents waiting to enter. Mom fusses over my hair. Apparently, Quinton's hair is Mother Approved.

"Favoritism, that's what this is," I hiss under my breath. "Complete and total favoritism."

"How does it feel knowing your mom loves me more than you?" Quinton teases.

“I know you spiked all our drinks with something.”

“Hn.”

“The Quinton fangirl syndrome.”

“Because I have so much time on my hands to make such a thing.”

“So you’ve thought about it?”

Quinton rolls his eyes.

“Ok boys, I know this is a pain, but put on your best smiles.” Mom pinches my cheek but gently caresses Quinton’s.

I gape. “See, favoritism!”

“Shh, keep your voice down.”

“Why am I pinched, and he gets a loving pat on the cheek?”

“Because you’re my son. I can pinch your cheeks as much as I want.” She continues doing so until they’re red.

“This is child abuse.”

My cries are ignored.

Trumpets blare outside the doors. Commotion can be heard at the stairs, paparazzi setting up to get some shots of the royal family. Quinton and I wait through the dull announcement, something to do with welcoming the prince, future king, protector of this great country, blah, blah, blah. Then the doors open and we step out.

Quinton only started joining me during these events last year. It was all the rave in the media, everyone discussing whether it was proper for Quinton to step out alongside the royal family when he’s not officially a part of it. We eventually said screw it and did what we wanted.

Now Quinton and I stand at the top of the stairs, waving to the cameras below. I say we but really mean me because Quinton half-assed a wave for about five seconds before simply taking hold of my hand. My entire body

stiffens when I catch the glares from the court members below. I shake off the hand hold after clearing my throat.

Quinton raises a brow.

My parents are next, so the two of us descend the stairs when their announcement is made. Cameras continue to flash on us until we disappear into the crowd with me finally taking a very much needed deep breath.

“I hate that part,” I hiss when grabbing a glass of wine. It tastes awful, but it was the first thing I saw and my throat is dry as hell.

“I hate the whole thing,” Quinton grumbles.

“You hate most things.”

Quinton hums. He almost sounds proud. Sometimes I think he’s gotten more evil over the years! Which I always thought to be impossible, but hey, Quinton has always been annoyingly impressive and just annoying in general.

“Your Majesty’s, what an honor it is to speak with you on this fine evening!” Autumn calls teasingly, appearing with Dahlton wrapped around her arm. She wears a long blue gown that Dahlton matches with his white suit and blue tie.

Behind them are Nora and Cassidy. Their dresses are less formal, with Cassidy wearing a simple red and white polka dot dress. Nora’s in a red and white striped one. I smile at both of them before facing Autumn.

“First of all, it’s Your Highness. My parents are Your Majesty,” I correct her and, proving that she is Quinton’s best friend and been around him too much, she rolls her eyes immediately. “And second, it’s an honor for me, but I think Quinton could do without this so-called honor.”

“I could do without half of it,” Quinton replies, glaring at Dahlton. Honestly, by this point, I think he just does it because Dahlton panics and

it’s hilarious to watch his eyes widen in pure terror.

Autumn has caught on, gently patting Dahlton’s arm when whispering, “He’s messing with you because of your reaction.”

“How else am I meant to react?” Dahlton whispers in return.

“You could react by leaving,” Quinton suggests with an evil grin.

“We could react by leaving instead. I’d rather be upstairs watching old Christmas movies and eating cookies.” I laugh, peering about the room to discover a few eyes are already on me.

“Better get some of this over with though,” I groan, tugging on the back of Quinton’s sleeve. “We’re already being stared at.”

“Let them stare. They can come to us.”

“I don’t want to piss them off anymore than they already are.”

“We breathe and it pisses them off.” Quinton grunts. Our friends give us apologetic smiles.

“Autumn, keep Nora and Cassidy company. Tell Langley and Ariel that we’ll catch up in a bit. I must mingle with others for a bit or they’ll never let me live it down.” I’m already pushing Quinton away. He’s half walking, half resisting until we’re in the crowd and heading across the ballroom.

When Quinton finally stops being a pain in the ass, he walks on his own. However, he reaches for my hand, so I quickly tug on his sleeve.

“You know holding hands will just piss them off more,” I whisper, to which he rolls his eyes.

“We’ve done far worse than hold hands in public.”

I shove him teasingly, smiling. “That was in high school.”

“You say that as if you think you grew up any since then.”

“Hey, I have!”

“That’s debatable.”

“You son of a—”

“Your Highness!” calls Charles Mamford, only a few steps away. I quickly put on a smile, Quinton does the same, but I’m sure it has more to do with me nearly cursing in front of a court member than genuine happiness to see said court member. Like I said, he’s a jackass.

“What an honor it is to see you here,” Charles says, as if I don’t show up every year, so of course I’m here, ya big dumb.

But I nod eagerly and reply, “It’s great to see you too.”

Charles is someone my father has constantly told me to get on his good side. Seems he’s teetering between siding with the Corallines and us, so if we kiss ass a bit, then he may see reason. I don’t know how Dad thinks I can pull off winning him over. I’m the reason we’re having any trouble at all, but ok. I’m gonna try my best.

We’re condemned to torturously dull conversations with politicians throughout the night. At least with Quinton it’s a bit more doable. He can hold a conversation with them far easier than me, or rather he gives off the vibe that he can. However, his brows are always furrowed with annoyance, which certainly doesn’t go unnoticed. Some sneer at us, others choose not to approach us at all. They are typically the court members that side with the Corallines, thus they are hiding with them on the opposite side of the ballroom.

When I excuse myself for a moment to get a drink, the Corallines stop their hiding, or at least John does. I’m grabbing myself and Quinton a beverage when I find John—who is currently attempting to dethrone Quinton to become ruler of all hell spawns—standing next to me with a smile that is anything but friendly.

“Your Highness,” he says with an exaggerated courteous bow. “It’s such a pleasure to see you doing your duties this evening.”

“You say that as if I don’t usually do them,” I try to say without clenching my teeth. Doesn’t really work. Pretty sure I hissed, but whatever.

“Mm, I suppose on some occasions you do, but I heard you’ve left a few conferences early to see your,” John’s eyes glance to Quinton across the room. “Friend.”

“My boyfriend, yes, I’ve made time for him as you’ve done the same for your wife.”

“My wife attends these events with me, so I don’t have to.”

“Maybe Quinton would come more often if he were more welcome.”

“Of course he’s welcomed,” John argues with feigned innocence. “All are welcome, but there is a difference between being welcomed and being necessary.”

“What are you implying?”

“That your little toy causes the crown more harm than good. Look at your parents.” John gestures to them, smiling and speaking animatedly with the press. But when Mom and Dad frown, it’s sad that I can take a guess what, or rather who, they’re talking about.

Quinton and I are always brought up with them; what they think about us, how they could allow it, if they still plan to pass the line of succession to me. Even after all these years, they’re asked and I’m the reason for it.

My stomach twists into a knot.

Even when I know there are as many with us as against us, it doesn’t make any of the situation easier. I wish it did. I wish I had the courage to always say, screw it, screw what everyone thinks, but I don’t. The older I get, the less optimistic I become and the more I fear the consequences of

every action I take. Thinking back to how I was in high school, cocky and arrogant, I don't want to be anything like that boy again. At the same time, he was the one able to say, screw it, and did what his heart desired. Now, I feel like I can't do much of anything. Now, I don't know who that boy is, where he went, if I can get him back or if I should get him back.

My thoughts are interrupted by the true ruler of the hell spawns, though.

"Is there a reason you're bothering the prince, Lord Coralline?" Quinton asks, appearing at our sides with a narrowed glare that is about to burn a hole through John's head. I actually wish it would and he'd cease to exist. That would make our lives so much easier!

"Bothering?" John snorts. "We're having a simple conversation."

"A simple conversation that you're using as an excuse to belittle your prince."

"We don't need an excuse to belittle him." Yet another newcomer chimes in, causing the three of us to peer behind John.

Tory Reid and Cynthia McEntire join us; both of which have made their feelings towards me, or rather my sexuality, known. They are the most powerful members backing John's claims to dethrone me, so they're more than happy to join in mobbing me.

"He does enough on his own to earn the criticism," Tory finishes, smiling kindly at John but not giving Quinton nor I the same courtesy.

However, both greet me with a bow. "Your Highness."

"So you say," Quinton argues immediately. "Yet last I heard, the public is growing more and more fond of him. How unfortunate for you, realizing that all these years have been a wasted attempt to dethrone him."

"Wasted?" Cynthia giggles. "Dear boy, you have no right to say that when you are the main reason why he isn't deserving. Show some shame, won't

you?”

Quinton’s hands form fists at his side. I look away, uncertain how to respond or if I even should.

“Shame for what? The actions of my father? How does that have anything to do with me?”

“Well, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“If that’s the case, then you shouldn’t have to worry either way. His Majesty is seen as an excellent king, is he not?” Quinton smirks. “So Aron must follow in his footsteps, based on your logic.”

“Quinton, that’s enough,” I whisper, setting a drink aside to tug once more on his sleeve, but his glare only intensifies. So do theirs and now I’m stuck between them with a drink and sweaty hands.

Cynthia looks at me and smiles. “Seems the prince can’t even stand up for himself without the help of the son of a crazed killer,” she sneers, swishing the wine in her glass before finishing it off. “Can you blame us for being concerned that our so-called prince won’t live up to expectations?”

Quinton snorts. “Expectations that you have made so high that you can’t even dream of reaching them yourselves.”

“We’ve been in our line of work since before you were born,” Tory chimes in. “We have the same expectations of the prince as we do ourselves.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Having a brief fling with the prince doesn’t give you any authority here,” John says, which has Quinton grinding his teeth. “This phase will end soon enough.”

“You sure hope it does so you can try to force your daughter on him again. Apparently, her happiness isn’t necessary either.”

John takes a menacing step forward while I force myself between them. That's definitely enough. At this rate, punches may be thrown. As much as I'd love to see John get his ass kicked, we're not exactly in the best company. And I'm tired of standing here doing nothing, which is all I can ever do now. What I'm meant to say, how I should respond, I don't have the foggiest and I hate myself for that.

As a kid, I could get away with cursing them out. People would forget about what I said rather quickly, pass it off as youthful arrogance. Now it is much different. Now I'm expected to handle everything with grace and, well, grace has never been my forte, so I'm screwed in that regard.

I press my hand to Quinton's chest, pushing him away while I growl, "Are you two forgetting that people are watching?"

I glance at the news outlets that have a sudden interest in us. They're already taking pictures, so I keep on the best smile I can when saying, "I think this is enough arguing for the night. I wish I could say it was a pleasure speaking with you all, but that'd be a lie."

John rolls his eyes. "Likewise, Your Highness." Then he glares at Quinton. "Mr. Barley."

Quinton looks ready to throw a punch, but I'm already pushing him towards our friends before Tory or Cynthia can respond. His feet have turned to lead because I swear he's a hundred pounds heavier, barely inching through the room.

"Come on, Quinton, don't let him get to you," I whisper.

"It's not me he's trying to get to," Quinton argues before we reach our friends. I spot Langley eyeing us, waiting patiently for us to approach. He gives a wave that I respond to but Quinton doesn't follow me over to them.

“Why do you let him talk to you like that?” Quinton asks, arms crossed. “They’ll never take you seriously if you let them walk all over you.”

I can’t count how many people have said that to me, yet nothing changes.

“What do you want me to do, Quinton?” I ask.

“Stand up for yourself.”

“How? How am I meant to do that?” I hiss under my breath. Seeing a few people showing interest in us, I take hold of Quinton’s wrist to guide him to the edge of the ballroom. We’re huddled together when I whisper, “I can’t get away with everything like I once did, and neither can you.”

I didn’t mean to sound like I snapped, but I definitely did.

Quinton’s eyes narrow. “Are you seriously mad at me for not taking their shit?”

“No.”

“You sound like you are.”

“I’m not mad, but,” I glance nervously at the paparazzi once more. Quinton grips my chin and forces me to look at him.

“You’re always doing that,” he says, causing me to raise a brow.

“What?”

“Watching everyone. Gauging their reactions to your every move.”

“Yeah, that’s... kind of what I have to do now.”

“Is it? You’re being paranoid, Aron.”

“Uh, can you blame me?” I gesture to the camera. “We’re always watched, always scrutinized.”

“And we always will be regardless of how well you’re supposedly doing or not. You can’t please everyone.”

He’s right. I know he’s right. It’s not as if I don’t already know this. Everything that is said to me now, I know it already. But knowing changes

nothing. It doesn’t change this feeling, settling deep in my gut, tearing me apart until I feel like that’s nothing left of me. Knowing doesn’t make breathing any easier. Everything always feels like it’s closing in around me. That I’m cowering from an earthquake that’s seconds away from tearing my house down, crushing me with it.

“I know that,” I whisper, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I know that, but Quinton, listen, it’s...I don’t want to be like I was.”

Quinton doesn’t seem to understand based on his scowl.

“In high school,” I clarify. “The kid that walked all over everyone because of my title. I don’t want to just say, I’m the prince, deal with it, and ignore what everyone says about me. But I’m so fucking scared that I won’t live up to what I promised. That stupid fucking speech I gave in high school. Do you remember it?”

Quinton nods.

“Everyone seemed so proud of me. I was proud of myself, but now I hate that I even said any of it. I feel like I built up such high expectations for myself that I simply can’t reach. Mom is so great. Dad is so great and I’m not. I’m just not. And every second, every moment that passes, I feel like I’ve screwed something else up. That’s all I’m doing.”

“But it’s not,” Quinton interrupts before I can delve any further into whatever the hell that was. He shakes his head, taking my hand afterwards to hold in his. “You’re not screwing anything up.”

“How can you, of all people, say that?”

“How can I, of all people, not say that?”

I wish I could believe him. But I don’t.

So I shake off his hand again, watching his face fall into a scowl. He sighs heavily, probably aware of what I’m going to say before I say it.

“We can talk more later. Here isn’t really the best place.” I peer around the room, at all the eyes, watching our every move. There’s never a moment of peace, and Quinton knows this. It’s why he inevitably gives in with a huff.

“A not so pleasant run in with the ruthless members of the court, I see,” Langley says when we finally reach them.

Quinton is clearly in a foul mood. He stands with Autumn, who attempts to feed him some cake, but he won’t look at her, or me for that matter. I wish he didn’t have to put up with all this shit. I wish I didn’t either. It’s exhausting. That seems to be my new favorite word; exhausting.

But it’s true, especially when I can’t even defend him. There he was, defending me against them, yet I stood there like a fool. They were belittling him too, they always are. Someone’s bringing something up about Quinton that’s apparently wrong, although he has done nothing but prove how he’s more worthy of the throne than I am. Instead of standing up for him, I stood on the sidelines like a little punk. Quinton, on the other hand, is beside me no matter what. He doesn’t care. He says what he wishes to say, simple as that. Is there a worst boyfriend of all time award? Because I deserve it.

“They just wanted to get under my skin.” I sigh.

“Did they?” Cassidy asks, frowning when I don’t respond, which is answer enough. “They know that they’ll never win against you, Aron. That’s why they’re so rough with you.”

Quinton’s shoulders roll. Something tells me he wishes to argue against that, but says nothing. I choose not to bring it up either, somewhat fearful of what he has to say, especially now when he’s clearly pissed off.

I wish I could console him, but lately all our arguments lead us in circles. We just got over the whole schooling thing, yet now there's a new issue. Well, not really new. It has always been here, but we're more focused on it since the last argument ended. When will they ever end? My brain is already working overtime with school and royal duties. Don't add issues with my boyfriend on top of it! Life, why do you hate me so?

"Thanks for coming everyone," I say to my friends with a wide smile. "At least we're safe here."

Ariel raises her glass. "Happy to be of assistance."

"Your Highness," Kingsley calls, bowing swiftly when our gazes land on him. "It's time for your interviews." Kingsley looks briefly at Quinton. "Will you be joining Mr. Underwood?"

Quinton has long since stopped trying to convince Kingsley to call him by his name.

"No. I've had enough mingling for one night," he answers, not looking at me while doing so. I try my best to hide my frown, but Langley catches onto it. He gives a sympathetic smile.

"Guess I have to go again. Should I survive the hounds, I will return." I wave goodbye to everyone, my eyes lingering on Quinton. When he catches my gaze, he looks away. That leaves my chest feeling heavy. At this rate, I think my entire body will cave in on itself. I shall be a pile of Aron dust floating in the wind.

Most of the evening afterwards is spent running around like a chicken with my head cut off. There are a few interviews on my own and some with my parents. Quinton has gotten caught by a few reporters as well, but his answers are brief and to the point. Most lose interest in him rather quickly or realize that they will get way more news material from me, the colossal

screw up, then the genius that can control them more than they control him. Must be nice. Would be nice if he taught me his ways, but still, I do not know how to pull a Quinton.

When the ball finally ends, I'm given sweet, sweet freedom. Quinton is already gone, having retired nearly an hour prior to the ball officially ending. I'm the one left saying goodbye to everyone, then dragging my exhausted ass back to the bedroom. Admittedly, I'm a little worried that Quinton may still be angry. I'm not even sure if it's me he's angry with or our situation in general, maybe both. All I know is that it sucks how often I hesitate outside our bedroom door.

But when I open said door, Quinton is laying in bed comfortably on his phone. He peers up at me, asking, "You survived?"

"No thanks to you." Which is a total lie. I would have been eaten alive by John and his goons if Quinton hadn't jumped in when he did.

"Hn."

"You left early."

"Everyone was annoying me."

"I'm telling Autumn."

Quinton rolls his eyes while I change. It feels so much better to slip into a pair of sweatpants. I'll get a shower in the morning. I slip into bed, laying next to Quinton while watching him tap his phone screen a few times. Without looking at me, he asks, "You're officially done with royal duties for a bit, right?"

"Mhm."

"Good. I'm getting us tickets to see The Brightsiders."

"You're going to sit through a whole concert of my annoying pop music?" I gasp, sitting up so fast that I damn near gave myself whiplash. To make

sure he’s telling the truth, I peer over his shoulder to find that he is, in fact, getting us tickets. “Wow, did the Ghost of Christmas Past pay you a visit, Mr. Scrooge?”

Quinton snorts. “No. We agreed to make plans over break.”

“Yeah, but you aren’t that big of a fan of The Brightsiders.”

“You’d end up falling asleep and snoring during any group I wanted to see.”

I’d argue, but it has happened before.

“Have you told Andy? He may end up saying we can’t go,” I say.

“I’ve told Cora already, so she’ll make sure we can go.”

“You really do use my mom to your advantage.”

Quinton twists his nose in disgust. “You should rephrase that.”

“Too lazy.”

“That’s not surprising to hear.”

Quinton finishes up purchasing our tickets before setting his phone aside. He leans back in bed with me curling into his side. Since he lets me without struggle, I take that as meaning he’s not as bothered about earlier as I thought, or he is that good at hiding it. I’m not sure and I’m not going to ask. Not like asking will change anything.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It's almost noon when I finally wake up the day after the ball. Quinton is in the shower; I hear the water running. I sit up, eyes heavy and crusted from a deep and blissful sleep. My limbs stretch and wrists crack when I swing them from side to side. Feels good to finally be on break! No more royal duties for at least a week. I can be a lazy piece of garbage, as we all secretly wish we could be.

Quinton steps out of the bathroom moments later. At least I'm assuming he is. My face is buried in the blankets. I am taking my sweet ass time getting up, thank you very much. There's some rustling in our room. Quinton is at his desk. I hear the papers shuffling about. Finally, I throw the blanket off to look at him, happy to finally have time to our—

"I'm going out to work on my thesis," Quinton says, already dressed and ready to leave. He shoves his laptop into a bag. Said bag now hangs off his shoulder and I'm hanging off the bed, bothered, annoyed, and bummed out.

“What? But it’s Christmas vacation.”

“Really? I had no idea.”

“Quinton!” I fling myself off the bed, crawl across the floor, then hop onto my feet at the door. I slam my hand against said door, narrowing my gaze on Quinton when he tries to leave. “Where are you going? Campus isn’t even open.”

“I’m meeting with some classmates at a cafe. If we’re lucky, we’ll finish today.”

“And if you don’t? You’ll, what, spend more of our already lacking time with your classmates?”

Quinton snorts. “Jealous, Princess?”

“Concerned, not jealous. As if I’d be jealous!”

Quinton’s eyes state he doesn’t believe me. He never does because he’s the genius that can read minds, apparently.

I cross my arms stubbornly. “Totally different.”

“Sure.” Quinton brushes past me, though I follow him like a lost puppy. “I’ll be back before dinner, then my thesis will be done and I won’t have as much work on my hands.”

“Can’t you wait until after break? If you’re that close, you can finish it later!”

“What’s wrong?” Quinton smirks, pausing at the bottom of the steps. “You going to miss me that much, Princess?”

That’s twice he has called me princess in the last thirty seconds. Son of a bitch!

“Fuck off,” I hiss.

“Try to behave while I’m gone.”

“What is that supposed to mean?!”

Quinton doesn’t answer, only walks out the front door with security detail close behind. When the door shuts, I shiver from more than the bit of cold air let in. The cars hum outside, then they’re gone.

What the hell? It’s Christmas break! This is the one time I actually have some freedom. We both do. We should be at home, together! Sure, I’ve got the next few days off, but this time makes up for all the time we’ve missed out on. I guess it would never add up to it, but still. I was hoping we could... hang out, like we used to. Like when we were in high school…

But do I have the right to complain? I’m constantly making plans, breaking promises and going off to work when we should be together. I could call off work, drop a few royal duties, but I don’t because I know what that will entail. So does Quinton, which is why he’s always so understanding, even if it bugs the hell out of me. If this can take some of the stress off Quinton, then I should sit back and, as he put it, behave. He could have phrased that better, though. I’m not a kid! Even if my thoughts would likely prove otherwise.

Since Quinton is gone for the day, I go about enjoying my freedom. I play some games, watch TV, scour reddit and conclude that I’m bored out of my fucking mind. Weird considering that I used to enjoy doing all this all the time except... except now I’ve grown accustomed to having Quinton around, or rather wanting him around. Oh, how far I have fallen. If only I could admit to others and even myself how I loathe Quinton but, alas, it seems my mind and heart are no longer capable of it. What a load of horseshit. No wonder he is getting so cocky! Well, cockier.

Before I could entertain myself easily, but now, there’s someone missing. We often spent our time in the game room. Even if Quinton is horrendous at games, he’d play along for hours. Or I’d sit with him in the library while he

read and I watched a movie on my laptop. Even if we weren't doing something together, we were there together and somehow that was totally normal.

Now, though, I sit in the arcade alone. Quinton's out with his classmates that I've never even met. I wonder what they're talking about. What sort of conversations do Quinton and his friends have? Or, well, his lab partners. I'm not even sure if they are friends! Knowing Quinton, they probably aren't, but he has changed. Quinton is friendlier than he used to be. At least around me he seems to be. Damn, I'm not even sure. Quinton talks to me about his school work but not necessarily his life at school and—and, wow, I only just now realized that? Guess it's hard to realize when Quinton is so wrapped up in my life and I'm so wrapped up in it, it's hard to see anything else.

Or that's only an excuse I tell myself to make me feel less shitty about being shitty. Probably the latter. It's always the latter.

It's true though, that there's a separation in our lives that was once so intertwined, it was hard to tell which was which. Now, though, I'm the prince and Quinton is the student. We aren't in the same school, hanging out with the same people and taking similar classes. We're not spending most of our time together like we once were, like we were used to for a long while. Our lives are taking different paths. There's a distance, not always a physical one but a mental one or an emotional one, if that makes sense?

Our lives don't fit as well together, and it shows, and it's scary.

These morbid thoughts are getting worse recently. Think I should see a therapist, which I've also been saying since high school but have yet to make an appointment. Making appointments are the worst. I'm almost 22

and I still won’t call the doctor or the dentist. Mom does and Mom will continue to do so cause fuck that!

Since gaming is out of the question, I decide to browse the internet, which is honestly always a bad idea, but it seems I’m a sucker for punishment. You’d think the news would get tired of fixating on me and Quinton, but alas, we are trending on twitter because of some news outlets covering us. As much as that bothers me, I can’t help but feel a little proud. Bitch, we’re trending! Doesn’t that just sound cool? No? Ok, it’s just me then.

Anyway, like I said, sucker for punishment, because I scroll through the topic we’re dragged into today. There’s a mix of things, actually. First, there are pictures of us holding hands at the ball, or at least Quinton trying to hold mine along with our whispering on the sidelines. Even I can’t deny that the pictures give a poor impression. Quinton is frowning, looking away from the crowd while I’m smiling, acting oblivious to his concerns. Way to make me look like a complete ass! Though I guess I kind of was being an ass.

Of course, there’s gossip about trouble in paradise and a possible break up, which every court member and their mother have a say in. Why are you guys on twitter? Go away!

I check on the articles, some having quotes of others belittling our actions, saying we should think of the children. Because it’s so difficult to explain why two men are holding hands. The audacity! Or that being so openly affectionate is something we, as royals, should not condone. Yet my parents are fluffy as hell in public and no one says a word. I roll my eyes and click off those real quick.

Doesn’t the world have better things to talk about? Can’t we go back to complaining about bad TV and movie adaptations of great books or arguing

over the color of dresses? Seriously, those were simpler times. I like simple. I vibe with simple. Simple is my game, but not my name. I don't know what I'm thinking.

Those pictures and articles are not what has my gut twisting up like a pretzel, though. There's something different, something new. It starts with a reply to one of the, is there trouble in paradise, tweets. There's a picture of Quinton with some guy I've never seen and someone asking, think he's cheating?

I snort but there's more; more pictures from people showing off Quinton with the same guy. Over and over again in replies and popular tweets that are now exploding faster than I can keep up with and yes, I'm trying to keep up. I'm being a dumbass looking through them all. I know I shouldn't because those in the comments are likely the ones that want to tear us down. But I can't stop looking, as if my eyes and hands have become glued to my phone.

There is some of Quinton in town with him, at the movies, out to eat, even one so recent that they're in a cafe. The poster claims they caught this photograph only minutes ago and I know it's true because Quinton is wearing the same thing he left in. Although they are not alone in the cafe, it's the same guy. Someone around our age with chestnut brown hair and eyes to match. He's taller than Quinton but a bit thinner with a wide smile. Quinton is smiling too.

Quinton is smiling.

I shouldn't feel bad that my lover is smiling in a photo, but I am. Although I've seen that smile more and more lately, among myself and friends, knowing that he's showing it to someone I don't even know, someone he's clearly spending a lot of time with—it hurts.

And that isn’t the only picture. Quinton smiles in a lot of them. Showing him on campus, hanging out with those students I’ve never met, with the people that are a part of his life that I’ve never met. He’s laughing and smiling and hanging out with them on campus like every other normal college student. Quinton is enjoying himself. He’s relaxed.

My hands shake. I know why, but I don’t want to face it. I don’t want to face these tweets any longer either, so finally, I set my phone aside. Then I turn the device off completely when I get the urge to continue looking. It’s no good for me, I know that. I know it’s all gossip and rumors that are spreading; that he’s happier as a normal college student, that our relationship is a mess, that there will be a break up soon.

Wow, what a turn. Not that long ago I was thinking about marriage yet now, as I lay in bed, I imagine Quinton walking through the door to say, let’s break up.

Fuck, I can hear it. The same apathetic voice as before, the same cold eyes watching me as he throws my love back in my face. I’d take it too. I’d just sit here and let him say whatever he wants because, deep down, I know he has a lot to say. I know that if he wasn’t such a mature bastard, he’d be telling me off.

I really wish for simpler times. Now, there never seems to be a moment of peace. I miss it. I miss high school. I miss simpler times. I miss who we used to be. I miss who I used to be.

When Quinton finally returns, I’ve shut off every electronic device near me hoping to avoid the articles. He must not have seen them seeing as he entered our room without care. Or maybe he doesn’t care because he has seen the articles and knows that they mean nothing. Ok, that’s doubtful.

Quinton probably doesn't even know how to work twitter, the freaking grandpa!

Seeing as he's not bringing up the booming news either, then I guess that's more reason to believe he hasn't seen it. Should I bring it up?

Hey, Quinton, you seem really happy with people other than me and that makes me uncomfortable, so, like, can you stop it?

That makes me sound like a fucking jackass. And yes, 90% of the time I can be described as a jackass, but in this case I rather not be, thanks. But when Quinton finally faces me, my stomach drops. I'm not sure why. Maybe because I was hoping he would smile at me, which makes no sense. It's not like something funny was said. He simply came home from working on his thesis. Or maybe I hoped he would bring it up, but since he didn't, I'm left here feeling like shit. I don't know, but the discomfort shows enough for Quinton to raise a brow.

"What?" He asks with the same monotone voice as ever.

"What, what?"

Quinton rolls his eyes. "You're staring."

"Am I not allowed to stare?"

"It's annoying."

"When am I not annoying?"

"True."

"You weren't supposed to agree," I grunt, as he takes a seat on the bed. He glances at the TV, which plays some movie with a name I can't remember. Then he twists his nose in confusion when finding my phone and our iPad stuffed under the pillows.

"Is there a reason these are here?" He asks, pulling both out to hold. "You're lucky you didn't break them."

“How could I break them if I know they’re there?”

“You’d forget.”

“Please, I’m not that stupid.”

“That’s debatable.”

I’m meant to continue the argument. Quinton is even waiting for it; smirking and eyes glistening over with the need for a challenge. But I can’t think of anything other than those photos and that guy in the photos and the Quinton with those strangers that I somehow don’t recognize. Although he’s right beside me, he feels a thousand miles away. If I reach out, he’ll fade.

“Did you hit your head while I was gone?” He asks.

“Huh? Oh, no, no, sorry. I guess I’m feeling worn out now that I’ve had the day to settle.”

Quinton hums, believing my lie or maybe wanting to believe it.

“How’d working on your thesis go?” I ask, watching Quinton get up to change. He slips into a sweater and some sweats.

“Fine. I managed to finish, but Dom said he’ll look over it one last time to make sure.”

“Dom?” The name rings a bell.

“The senior from Northview that I met while touring.”

“Oh, right.”

Quinton shrugs like it’s no big deal because, I guess, it is no big deal. But for some reason, my mind is making it astronomical. Is he the one from the pictures? I want to ask, but the question catches in the back of my throat.

“Do you know where the suitcases are?” Quinton asks, walking over to the door to peer into the hall for someone.

“What do you need a suitcase for?”

Quinton leans back into the room to stare at me like I’m an idiot.

I purse my lips when grunting, “What?”

“Visiting my mom.”

“Oh, right.”

Quinton shakes his head in disbelief, then disappears into the hall. He must have spotted someone that he could ask, so I’m left alone with my thoughts once again, which is never a good idea. I should suggest to Quinton about making some type of device that can shut my brain off when I’m alone. That way I’ll never come up with any dumb ideas.

Like how Quinton would probably be happier with someone like Dom, a perfectly normal college student with similar interests, I assume. There would be no politics, no paparazzi, no judgment, and a chance to be everything Quinton ever wanted to be.

If I said that, though, he’d likely get angry with me again. I don’t want that, especially not now when we have time off. I don’t want to bring up the pictures or Dom or anything that could ruin our time together. I want to enjoy our break, pretend like no one else but us exists, pretend to be the same carefree kid I once was. I want to be cheerful of Aron and demonic Quinton again.

We’ll open presents on Christmas morning together. We’ll go see The Brightsiders, listen to their music that will probably blow out our eardrums together. We’ll spend New Years after the parade in the capital and listen to people sing through the streets during the fireworks. And afterwards, hopefully, we’ll both feel a bit better.

So when Quinton returns, he’s probably incredibly shocked to find himself trapped between my arms. The suitcase drops with a loud thud when Quinton presses his hands to my hips. His voice is muffled against my temple when he asks, “What are you doing?”

“Hugging you.”

“Why?”

“Because I can.”

Quinton snorts. “Childish.”

But the tone is endearing. It’s what I wanted to hear, probably what I needed to hear.

I end up squeezing tighter until Quinton grunts, “Are you trying to kill me, dumbass?”

“Maybe.”

That gets a chuckle, one that softens when he finally gives in and holds me just as tightly back. Like this, it feels like we’re two carefree kids again, only worrying about adulthood. Sometimes, I think that’s a feeling we all need because growing up, it kind of fucking sucks.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Christmas day passes and finally—"It's concert time, bitches!"

"If you're going to be like this all night, I'm not going."

I glare at my buzzkill of a boyfriend that's dressed like a moody emo kid being forced to attend Christmas dinner with his family that simply doesn't understand him. He happily returns the glare, arms crossed and lips set into a thin line. We challenge each other to back down, but this is us we're talking about. Do we ever back down? So this has turned into a staring—heh—a glaring contest. See what I did there?

We're standing in the entryway waiting for the go ahead from Andy to leave. This waiting is making me even more excited. I'm powered up, ready to go! But of course Quinton has to be a bastard.

"It's a concert. You're supposed to be excited!" I finally give in with a holler, throwing my arms wildly in the air.

I wonder if Quinton actually planned to get tickets sooner because this sweater he got me for Christmas is a Brightsiders sweater. It's perfect for the occasion. I tried to get Quinton to wear a piece of their merch but the look of disgust he gave me almost made me want to burn the shirt, too. Either way, who knows if this was planned earlier? I don't care as long as we go to this dang concert and have some fun.

"You're too excited."

"There's no such thing!"

Quinton pops his ear with his pinky then flicks earwax at me, or none, I don't know. His ears are probably clean, but I dodge anyway, kicking my legs in his general direction in a form of a threat. He does not care about this threat, choosing to remain stationary with his eyes narrowed.

"You're ridiculous," he sighs, probably already exhausted. The night hasn't even begun!

"Come on, be more excited, Quinton."

"No."

"We both agreed to go. Stop pretending like you aren't hyped."

Quinton grunts when I latch my arm around his neck. Before he can throw me off him, Andy steps in to say, "Time to go."

"Alright!" I scream so loud that Quinton actually flinches away.

"Idiot," he hisses, rubbing his ears and squinting his eyes.

"Sorry." I chuckle, but I'm totally not sorry. Quinton knows this too, so he punches me in the gut. I let him because I deserved it. Then we're both heading outside to hop into the car.

Jeremy has already been informed to play The Brightsiders on the ride, which has Quinton asking, "Why are we listening to a band we're going to listen to?"

“For the hype!”

“Is hype your new favorite word?”

“Tonight it is!”

“This was a terrible idea.”

“For you, maybe.” I wrap my arm around his, resting my cheek against his shoulder. By doing this, I feel how relaxed Quinton really is, proof that he isn’t dreading tonight nearly as much as he’s pretending to be. It brings on a genuine smile along with a sigh of relief.

“Thanks for this,” I say to him a few minutes into the ride.

Quinton hums, glancing at me curiously.

“I know they aren’t a band you’re particularly fond of,” I add.

“I can manage.”

“I’m just glad it’s finally break.” I groan, burying my face closer to Quinton’s shoulder. He playfully tries to knock me away a few times before settling. “Being together on Christmas, going to a concert, even New Years. Feels like forever since we’ve had a few days to ourselves.”

Quinton hums again. “We’ve both been busy.”

“Yeah.”

“Aron,” Quinton says in almost a warning fashion.

“What?”

“Are you going to start again?”

“Start what?”

Quinton gives me a look, one that says he suspects I’m going to want to apologize. I bite my lip apologetically before responding, “Maybe... a little.”

“Don’t. We’re going to the concert and we’re going to have fun.”

“We?” I grin from ear to ear. “We, as in both of us.”

“We as in you will like the music and I will like whatever dumb shit you get into.”

“You bas—”

Quinton cuts me off with a kiss, a kiss that has me twisting my fingers into his hair. I feel the handle of the door press into the small of my back when Quinton leans over me. His tongue has long since pushed past my lips. Jeremy is spared of any noises thanks to the boisterous radio and tinted screen between us.

Quinton’s cool hand replaces the handle of the door and runs up my back. He pulls me close against him, running his lips down my neck next to mark it. I groan, fingers now gripping his sweater until he finally pulls away, only to lean back in for one brief peck. Then he’s sitting normally again, shrugging his shoulders and saying as if our conversation never even stopped, “You know it’s true.”

“H-Huh?” Sorry, my brain is mush.

“You getting into shit.”

“Ah, right, yeah, probably.”

Quinton smirks knowingly and, well, I would argue, but it is true. And I can’t right now. All I’m thinking about is taking a brief detour to a motel or something. In all seriousness, if we’re at a concert I’ll probably be drinking and, yes, I’ll be the one to start a scene because that’s how I roll. Damn, I do make it really easy for Quinton to mess with me. I need to work on myself.

“What are our plans for New Years?” Quinton asks. I hesitate to answer, seeing as my brain is still in the gutter. Quinton flicks at me when some time passes without my response.

“Oh, uh, the usual, I guess?” I scratch the back of my neck. “I have to be in the parade, as usual, then watch the party in the capital, enjoy the fireworks. Why?”

“Let’s go to Hadden’s Tower.”

“The museum?” That confuses the hell out of me for multiple reasons, but the first that comes to mind has me asking, “Isn’t it closed?”

“They’ll be open for us. Cora told me it’s quiet and a good place for fireworks. I don’t feel like putting up with everyone this year.”

“That does sound like a good idea.” I laugh. “I don’t want to put up with them either, so, ok, let’s go. If it sucks, it’s your fault.”

Quinton rolls his eyes. “Whatever, Princess.”

We’re quiet for the rest of the ride, enjoying each other’s company until we reach the venue. My excitement amplifies by a hundred, which is both impressive and concerning. Though if a concert can’t make one forget about their everyday problems, then I don’t know what else will because, personally, the only idea on my mind is dancing. Bust a move, move to the groove, shake that ass or whatever, just don’t think about it. Dance, jump, sing, hop, scream and throw my arms in every direction. That is my motto for the next, however, many hours this concert lasts. I don’t know, didn’t check!

Quinton keeps at a safe distance, the two of us in our own box with a clear view of the stage. The lights are bright and sporadic, music loud and thumping so that the very floor vibrates beneath our feet. We have our own table of refreshments, from drinks that burn the throat to snacks sweeter than sugar. Quinton isn’t as intrigued by the sweets as I am, but he has a drink in hand, leaning against the glass when watching the show. I catch a

few head bobs and foot taps in there so, whether he wants to admit it, the music is more than just tolerable. He's just being picky, as per usual.

The tensions of yesterday and all the nights before vanish between guitar riffs and sweet melodies. There's only the music and the joy it brings coursing through me until I'm a ball of pure energy. Once I was known for that, compared to many, I still am, but Quinton knows better. I know better, that lately I've been a bit lacking. Lately I put on more of a show, but not here. Here, the only show is the one on stage.

Judging by Quinton's soft smile slipped between songs. He must know it, too. I'm a few drinks in. The night is being sung away. Even Quinton hums along, but then I do the absolutely unthinkable; I steal Quinton's drink, hehe. His furrowed brow already has an answer to my unspoken request, but when have I ever backed down? Especially now. I don't really want to know. It's too much fun.

"Dance," I order, the word already coming out slurred. I cannot be drunk already, but the swaying in my footsteps says that I am at least tipsy. Tipsy, Aron. Tipsy, Princey, haha!

"No," is Quinton's eloquent reply, so I grab his arms. He knocks my hands away. I return them, attempting to at least push his body to the rhythm. He refuses, shaking his head and stepping back. Of course I follow, my frustration building as he only leads me in circles around the room.

Too much walking. I don't know where I'm going. The ground is blurry and fluffy. Fluffy? Carpet? Carpet's fluffy. Wait, no. It's soft 'cause my shoes are off. Where did my shoes go? When did I even take them off? I don't know, but I'm on a mission and it's not about shoes!

"Stop being a stiff!" I shout, pouting at the eye roll Quinton gives.

"I'm not dancing."

“S’cause you can’t?” I smirk at my challenge that lights a spark in Quinton’s eyes.

Doesn’t matter how ridiculous the challenge is, if it’s a challenge, especially between each other, then we go for it. No matter how old we are or how long it’s been. I imagine at sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, we’ll be challenging each other. Only by then the challenge will probably be to see who can move the fastest or make it down the stairs without breaking a hip. I giggle at my own thoughts that Quinton is not aware of, so yeah, he’s kind of staring at me like I’m crazy.

“Come oooooon,” I plead, tugging on Quinton’s arms. At least now he’s letting me swing his arms up and down, then from side to side. “Y’know, you look more ridicka-mm-ridickle-”

“Ridiculous?”

“Ridiculous, yeah, with me swinging ya arms.” I continue the actions until Quinton pulls away. Oops, is that it? No more dancing? Mm, I wanted to dance though. Dancing is fun!

Quinton pulls me in, his arms around my waist to steady my very unsteady self. My hands grip his arms to keep me upright as he leans in for a kiss. The next song is playing, a slow melody that my fuzzy brain recognizes, I think. It’s a nice song. I like this song. But I like Quinton’s kiss more. The warm touch of his lips and his arms around me, holding me close. When we pull apart, we’re swaying.

“S’not dancing,” I mumble into his chest, but I’m also leaning against him, simply following his lead.

“What is this, then?” he asks softly.

“Swaying.”

He snorts. “Do you have a problem with swaying?”

“S’not dancing.”

“Yes, you said that already.”

“Swaying is good.”

For now. Dancing will be for another time. And by another time I mean a mere minute later after the slow song is finished and I’m Naruto running around the box. Quinton, once again, has put a safe distance between us, paying far more attention to my foolish self than the show. After another drink, Quinton orders them to be taken. Andy has to practically tear me off him when he takes my alcohol.

Bitch ain’t takin’ my sweets, though. Ain’t nobody takin’ my sweets. Not even Quinton, who is now merely smirking in the corner while I dance the night away.

“Prince Aron Vaughn and partner, Quinton Underwood, Wasted Over Christmas Break!”

“Prince in Drunken Stupor after Pop Concert!”

“Drunken Mess, Prince Aron Vaughn, Puked after Last Night’s Brightersider Concert!”

“Boyfriend a Bad Influence to the Prince?”

And the memory of our date is now ruined. Great.

“I didn’t even puke!” I scream at my phone that is showing me nothing but blown up lies.

Some claim I was seen puking before the concert even started, others say I talked to them while drunk and was a total asshole. I’ll have you know, I’m a happy-go-lucky drunk! The real asshole right now is the sober one, you freaking jackasses!

“Can you believe this shit?” I ask, watching Quinton step out of the shower. It’s sad how he doesn’t even flinch upon seeing the titles whenever

I show him. His eyes, however, darken, and his shoulders slump a smidge, though he doesn't show anger or that he's even upset. He merely shrugs.

"Ignore it," he says.

I wonder if he's saying that for himself, too.

"I know." My phone is tossed aside, otherwise I'll be drowning in drama again. I don't want another mystery man fiasco, which continues to linger in the back of my mind. I've never brought him up. Neither has Quinton and there has been little talk of him online, either. Suppose that's good. Eventually he'll fade into nothing—I hope.

"They're doing it for views. People don't read articles anymore, only headlines." I groan and throw myself back on the bed. "It's just...they act like we can't act our age, ever. Sure, I'm the future king, but I'm still 21. I want to go out and have fun!"

Quinton hums.

"And they're the ones making up lies! I got drunk, but I was safe with you. We had a designated driver, and you were fine. Isn't that a good role model? Showing that you can go have fun, but be responsible about it." I sit up fast, watching Quinton for his response, which is a nod. "Sorry, I'm preaching to the choir."

"You are." Quinton continues to towel dry his hair until tossing it into the dirty hamper. Then he's back on the bed with me. "Give it an hour or two, then everyone will talk about the parade tonight."

"We still on to go to Hadden Tower?"

Quinton nods. "Seven o'clock, not long after the parade ends." He flicks me in the forehead. "Don't be late."

I swat his hand away with a smile. "Yeah, yeah, I gotcha."

There’s a knock at the door. Kingsley is calling for me to head downstairs. Guess security wants to go over some of the parade plans one last time. That has me groaning and kicking my legs about like the adult that I am. Lucky Quinton still doesn’t have to take part. That is one thing we haven’t let him in on yet, seeing as no one has ever sat in the carriage with us parading through town until after marriage. Knowing Mom, she’ll probably bring that up again tonight just to piss me off.

Quinton will certainly be called down later. We’ll be leaving around three to begin our rounds speaking with people in town and starting the New Year celebrations. For now, though, he gets to lounge in the bedroom.

“Have fun today,” Quinton says from the bed, lazing about in an obviously taunting manner.

I flip him off for it. “Fuck you.”

“You wish that was what you could be doing instead.”

My cheeks flush without my consent. “Fuck you twice.”

Quinton smirks.

“You know what I mean. Shut up, pervert!” I slam the door after my humiliating exit. I can still hear Quinton snickering from behind the door, though. Bastard!

Downstairs, Andy goes over the parade plans that I’ve grown so accustomed to that there’s not much point going over them. While they change our route every year, the rules are fairly simple. Do what Andy says. Don’t get caught by the crowd. If something goes wrong, don’t panic. That’s about the only rule I’m not so confident about because if something went wrong, I would probably be the one to freak out.

Preparations for Quinton and I begin around eleven. There’s some silly hair and makeup done, more reminders of our plans, and by noon we’re off.

The ballroom has gone from Christmas decorations to New Year. The court members are here, unfortunately, and Dad always gives a speech about the progress of last year and the hopes for next.

Quinton sits next to me on stage. There's a moment when his hand reaches for mine. I hate to admit that I flinch. And I hate that Quinton ends up not going through with holding hands. I wish he would and I wish he wouldn't. He rests his hand on his lap, sitting frozen as a statue, and revealing a small smile once every few minutes. Something cold settles in my chest, something cold but as heavy as lead. It weighs me down, practically drags me to the lowest pit that nips at my conscience, that decides now would be a good time to remind me of those photographs. The ones of Quinton on campus with his friends, in a life without me where he smiles more often, more easily. Among those friends may be one that could make Quinton continue to smile, one that won't make him sit on stage with hundreds of hungry reporters waiting to strike or a public aching for drama.

I can't look away from their hungry eyes, like beasts waiting for a sign of weakness so they can devour us. Always watching. Always waiting. Always a second away from stumbling off the edge into the darkness. My chest tightens, aching, painful enough that I bite back a whimper. My hands shake. The room blurs, swaying in my vision like melted color. I'm not breathing. I don't know if I can or I don't want to. Dad's words jumble together. I'm getting dizzy. Each breath is harder to take—

"Aron."

Quinton's hand takes mine. It's then I realize I'm sweating. Quinton's hand is cool. His eyes are concerned, voice low when he whispers, "Are you ok?"

I give him a smile, one that Quinton sees right through, but I still have the audacity to say, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

And that may have been the biggest lie I ever told.

When Dad’s speech is over, a few more are given by court members, then it’s time to go through the motions. Much like the Christmas ball, there’s discussion of politics or what Dad mentioned in his speech. I stick extra close to Quinton this time. I’m not sure why, but I’m not feeling myself today. Sometimes it’s hard to breathe or I forget what I’m going to say. My hands continue to shake, especially when attention is on me. I do my best to smile, but sometimes it just doesn’t work.

“Seven o’clock,” Quinton reminds me when he’s getting ready to meet up with Langley and the others. His eyes narrow. “Hadden Tower.”

“I know, I know. I’ll be there, I promise.”

“If you’re late by even a minute, I’m leaving.”

“Uh, huh.” I grin at his eye roll.

“Seven o’clock.”

“I got it, geesh!” I shove him out the door. “Get lost, bastard.”

Quinton hesitates. I expect him to speak. There’s something about the way he’s looking at me that makes my toes curl. He says nothing though, leaving to meet up with our friends. I wanna slap him for it, watching his smug ass walk away. I’d say skip, but Quinton doesn’t skip, yet somehow he gives the feeling of skipping since he hates these encounters as much as I do. But it’s easier for security for him to leave early. A few bodyguards follow him and I’m left to fend for myself in the jungle. Actually, I’d take the jungle over this.

About an hour into the event, Dad calls from across the ballroom, “Aron, come here for a moment!”

He’s standing with Michael Deshante, a politician that’s close with Dad, but he lives pretty far away, so we rarely see him. Beside him is a young girl, I think his daughter, Molly. I’m proven correct when Dad introduces me, “I’m sure you remember Lord Michael Deshante, and this is his daughter, Molly.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Highness.” Molly bows alongside her father. She’s tall, nearly my height even with low heels on, with long black hair and dark earthy brown eyes.

“I thought it’d be good for the two of you to talk,” Dad says with a wide grin. He leans over. “She’s good friends with quite a few of the younger politicians that’ll be running next quarter for a position on the royal council. Should they succeed, they’ll knock out people like Tory and Cynthia.”

My eyes widen. Molly grins and gives a very discreet thumbs up.

“I can’t promise anything,” she says with a kind smile. “But we’re not so fond of the Corallines either. So I am more than happy to set up some meetings to help earn some brownie points prior to any possible future employment.”

“Even if they don’t succeed, it’ll be good for you to make some friends of your own,” Michael adds. “Creating your own bonds with others will make the road to the throne much easier. Your father and I met in our teen years, actually.”

There’s a sudden sense of relief. If it weren’t for Dad, I wouldn’t know who to trust. This offer of help would likely make me question everything, if it’s serious or not, and whether I can trust them. I trust Dad though, so I smile and say, “Yeah, Dad has told me the story.”

Dad beams. “I never expected you to go for politics. Michael was pretty dense in high school.”

Michael laughs. “I don’t want to hear that coming from you.”

Molly’s soft giggle garners my attention. She gives another smile before checking her phone. “Ah, the parade is about to start, though.” She slips her phone into her pocket, but her eyes are sparkling with excitement. “Finally, a breath of fresh air—ah—w-wait, I needed my phone!” She’s frantically searching her pockets although she just put her phone away. It makes me laugh until she pulls it back out.

“If it’s alright with you, Your Highness, could we exchange numbers?” She hands her phone over. “The parade should be over around six, right?”

I nod, already typing in my number.

“I’m meeting up with a few people afterwards for dinner. Would you care to join us? It’s nothing formal!” She’s quick to add with a firm shake of her head. “Think of it as just hanging out with some possible future council members.”

I snort. “That doesn’t really help with the not formal part.”

Andy is calling for us now. We’re meant to get ready for the parade. I return Molly’s phone to her.

“A dinner at six should be fine. I was going to have dinner with Dad and Lorrence Olaine,” I say. Molly grimaces as if she knows my pain. Something tells me she does, especially when she nods eagerly with every word that I add, “I’d much rather hang out with almost anyone else. I’ll have to take it up with security first, so I’ll text you later?”

“I look forward to it.” Molly bows before we walk away. I wave goodbye until we’re out of the ballroom. A weight is lifted from my shoulders immediately. I hadn’t realized how nervous I was in there until it’s only Mom, Dad, and me in the limo.

“You’re taking some great first steps, Aron,” Dad says, patting me warmly on the back.

“Hmm? What happened?” Mom asks.

“I introduced him to Michael Deshante’s daughter, Molly. She has some good connections that will hopefully make the coming years easier for Aron.”

“Oh, I’ve met Molly! She’s a sweet girl, very friendly, which is definitely someone you want on your side.” Mom wraps her arm around my own.

I nod. “Yeah, I’ll be having dinner with her and some of her connections tonight after the parade.”

“After the parade? Aren’t you meeting up with Quinton?”

“Yeah, at seven. We’ll eat at six, so I’ll be able to make it.”

Mom hums. “Ok.” Then jabs me in the nose with her pointed nail. “You better not forget.”

“I won’t, I won’t!”

As much as I absolutely despise the political aspect of the New Year, I love the parade. Who doesn’t love a good parade? There’s candy, music, lights, and fireworks. What else do you want?! Don’t answer that. It’s a rhetorical question and I don’t care if you don’t like parades because I do. Fudge off.

Every year Mom, Dad, and I get to ride through the streets in a horse-drawn carriage, surrounded by guards, but they’re no longer at eye level, so they’re forgettable. The carriage is always white, something to do with starting the new year with a fresh slate or something? I don’t remember that kind of jargon. They’re lucky I even know a word like jargon! I’d tell Quinton, but he’d probably snort and comment how he already knows the

word or, wow, why are you surprised that you know that? Freaking jackass can never just celebrate my mental victories with me.

Anyway, Mom and Dad sit behind me in a seat one tier above while I'm on my own, waving to the people that line the streets to see the performers. Bands from all across the country come to play, with our own band from the capital marching just ahead of us. The music is a mix of traditional and, thankfully, more recent music.

There're performers and acrobats, you name it and we probably got it. The parade continues on for miles, lasting nearly two hours, including the few break times. Kids run past with firecrackers and hand held fireworks. Citizens watch from rooftops where you can smell the fresh cookouts and see the lights set up for a long evening of drinking and games. Usually Mom, Dad, Quinton, and I see the fireworks, then head home to play board or card games. Once Quinton wasn't a fan, but once he realized how easy it is to beat me, he enjoys it. What kind of boyfriend is he? I need better taste, seriously.

I end up spotting Quinton about halfway through the parade. He's with Langley and everyone on the rooftop of a fashion brand owned by Ariel's parents. They're all making faces at me. Lucky bastards getting to enjoy the parade while I have to sit through it! Ok, listen, yes, I enjoy the ride, especially when sometimes the driver will speed race around the castle grounds. Yes, I ask him. Yes, I know I'm nearly a 22-year-old man. Do not judge me. We enjoy what we enjoy, and I enjoy a horse-drawn carriage. Sue me!

Still, I'd like to be up there with them. I stick my tongue out, earning a middle finger from Langley. I can't see Quinton clearly, but I sense him rolling his eyes. I don't know, I just feel it in the air, like a spidey sense,

though in this case it’s a Quinton sense. When the parade finally comes to an end, it’s time to meet up with Molly and my hopeful future friends. I send Quinton a quick text;

Aron: Hey, Dad introduced me to Molly Deshante. She has a lot of connections that may take future positions at the court. I really want to get on their good side tonight, so I’m meeting up with them for a quick dinner. This could seriously help us, if things go well!

Quinton: That’s good. Just remember. Hadden Tower. Seven o’clock.

Aron: I KNOOOOOOW! I’m not stupid, geesh.

Quinton: Debatable.

Aron: You’re so not getting laid for, like, a week.

Quinton: You’ll cave in ten minutes, Princess.

Seriously, why do I have such shit taste in men? I ask myself while smiling like a complete fool at some dumb text message. I’m hopeless. Why am I like this? Someone help me.

“Your Highness!” Molly calls when I step into the designated cafe. She waves from across the room with a handful of others, some familiar and unfamiliar faces.

I’m quick to join them, smiling as Molly introduces them one by one. Most are at least recognizable names, up-and-coming politicians I’ve heard of prior to today or the children of well off diplomats and business owners. Most of them are older, I’m assuming in their thirties to forties, but it’s better than hanging out with the ancients on the council that still don’t even know how to operate modern day technology. Should I make that a new law? You can’t run for any form of office if you can’t turn on your computer without your grandchildren’s assistance? Eh, guess that would be discriminatory—oh how I wish it could work, though!

Just as Molly promised, this is not a meeting about politics. The first topic brought up is actually a complaint from one of the younger girls here, Erika, “If my father sets me up with one more strange man, I may go to jail for murder.”

I choke on my drink.

“I wish I had the guts to tell my parents no when they brought strange girls over. Maybe I wouldn’t have gotten a divorce,” Willis grumbles. There are dark bags under his eyes. Something tells me this divorce was recent. Wow, didn’t expect this to be the topic of conversation, but I’m oddly ok with it.

“My dad finally backed off last year.” Molly laughs. She looks at me with a smile. “It’s so sweet that you found someone in high school. I’ve never met Mr. Underwood, but he seems like a smart guy and compliments you greatly.”

I snort. “Please, don’t ever meet him because if he hears you say that, he’ll never let me live it down.”

It’s kind of nice to hear everyone laugh. Even if our ages range, the conversation flows easily because, the simple fact is, we have a lot in common. Everyone at his table has pressure on them from their parents, their names, what they’ve inherited, which is stuff that Langley and I have talked about. But I’ve never really sat down with anyone else to discuss it, so I sit quietly for once. Also, don’t tell Quinton, he may suspect the world is ending.

I can’t say it isn’t nice, having an entire table of people that can relate to me. I’ve always felt so cut off from everyone, either because of my age or my title. Right now, though, I’m settled. I’m comfortable. My hands aren’t shaking and I didn’t realize they even were before until now. Laughter

comes easier. There's no pressure, just silly discussions over some snacks when Andy comes over to say, "Your Highness, it's nearly seven."

"Huh? Already?" I peer at my phone to find that it's quarter till seven.

"Excuse me for a moment." I step away to call Quinton. Things are going so well that I don't want to miss this opportunity. The closer we get, the better because, like Michael and Dad were saying, the more people I have on my side, the easier the future will be. I can spare Quinton so much pain. I can actually do something for once.

Quinton answers in a jiffy. "Wow, I'm impressed you remembered."

"Shut up," I growl. "I'm going to be a little late. The fireworks don't start until eight, anyway."

Quinton's quiet.

"I think I might make some good friends here. Molly's nice and we all have a lot in common. This may be my chance to finally get the Coralline's off our backs."

"Can't you reschedule?" Quinton asks so softly that I barely hear him.

"Yeah, but I'd rather just stay a little longer. I'll meet up with you in time for the fireworks."

Quinton's sudden silence is unnerving, even more so when he grunts. "You know, you often complain about our lack of time together, yet now when we have time, you're not going to take it?"

I can't think of a response. I don't know what I did, but it was wrong. Quinton doesn't let me speak.

"Fine, stay there. I want to be alone for a while, anyway."

Quinton hangs up. My hands are shaking again and the silence is killing me.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Quinton

"I'm going to be a little late. The fireworks don't start until eight, anyway!"

Is he fucking serious?

"I think I might make some good friends here. Molly's nice and we all have a lot in common. This may be my chance to finally get the Coralline's off our backs."

He's joking. Aron loves to joke. He's definitely joking.

"Can't you reschedule?" I ask. My hands tremble.

Please. Don't do this again. Just once. Aron, please.

"Yeah, but I'd rather just stay a little longer. I'll meet up with you in time for the fireworks."

Something snaps. I'm waiting. Always waiting. Another missed anniversary. Another forgotten birthday. Another missed convention. Another canceled date. Silly, childish things for silly childish people.

I am a silly, childish person because I’m not fine. I’m not fine at all.

These last few years I sat alone in our room, at my apartment, in restaurants, waiting, constantly checking my phone for updates. I questioned where Aron was, when he’d come, and simply accepted it when he wouldn’t show. Then, as time went on, I stopped checking. I sat alone in restaurants and ordered a meal because I knew I’d wait or he wouldn’t show up at all. I was hungry, and I’d be more annoyed if I didn’t eat. By the time Aron told me he couldn’t make it, I’ve already eaten and paid the bill.

“It’s fine,” I always said because I told myself that. I said it so much that I believed it, but I don’t anymore.

Maybe this is my fault. Maybe I should have said more. Maybe I should have thrown a fit. Maybe I should have done something, but it’s too late now. I can’t do this anymore. Waiting. Always being disappointed. Always being disappointed with Aron while telling myself I’m not. Always putting him before me, but he has stopped doing that for me. I told myself I understood, but I’ve grown greedy. Being with Aron has made me greedy.

I want his attention. I want his time. I want his love. I want us, but we haven’t been much of an us for some time so I’m not fucking fine. Over and over, always canceling, always leaving. Just once, can’t we be most important? Can’t I be most important? Just. Fucking. Once.

My voice is shaking when I ask, “You know, you often complain about our lack of time together, yet now when we have time, you’re not going to take it?”

I’m angry. So angry. What the hell am I doing here? Aron doesn’t answer. He’s quiet on the line. I wonder what sort of face he’s making. I wonder if I’ve worried him, and a twisted part hopes that I have.

“Fine,” I grunt. “Stay there. I want to be alone for a while, anyway.”

I hang up.

This isn't like me, but maybe that's a good thing. Maybe I need this because here I am, at Hadden's Tower, attempting to do what I never thought I would. I set a date. I made plans. I fucking researched, like some love struck idiot, how to do a damn proposal, hoping to make this a moment we'll never forget. I got us a chef to make our favorite meal. I ordered wine and roses, as cheesy as it sounds. I was excited all the while. Excited and nervous and hopeful. I set up a space on the balcony to watch the fireworks on New Year's Eve. I got the damn rings, and I made notecards on what I wanted to say.

I imagined the expression Aron would give after arriving. I imagined his smile, his nervous laughter and soft teasing. I imagined his blush and shock as I got down on one knee, and how he answered and how, for a single moment, it'd just be about us.

But Aron isn't coming. Again.

Now he may be, only out of worry, and I can't deal with that. Not anymore. You're the real idiot, Quinton Underwood, for ever thinking this could work.

"Sir?"

"What?" I hiss at whatever worker is somewhere behind me. I refuse to check, continuing to stare at the stupid matching golden rings in a black box. The rings I bought months ago, the rings I bought before Aron even asked me about marriage, the rings I thought I was willing to give, but now…

"Is His Highness on his way? Should we be making preparations?" They ask.

“No. Cancel everything.” I slip the box into my pocket. Without glancing at them, I storm out of the room and down the steps.

“Sir, Sir Underwood!”

I’ve always been calm. Aron often berates me for it, often wishes to see me break. If he were here now, he’d finally get his wish. The moment I’m in the car, the moment my driver separates us with tinted glass, I break. I wish I could stop. I wish the tears would stop. I wish this pain that has festered over weeks, months, years, would go away. All of it washes over me in waves, leaving brief moments of gasped breaths and choked cries, then it drowns me again.

I hate it. I hate it; this disappointment and this...acceptance. Will this be our future? Another missed anniversary. Another forgotten birthday. Another missed convention. Another canceled date.

Is that what I really want?

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Aron

"Is everything alright?" Molly's tender question comes from behind me.

"Uh, I…" I honestly don't know. I excuse myself again, leaving Molly with a knitted brow. When I try to call Quinton, it goes straight to voicemail. When I send him a text, he doesn't reply even after I try multiple times, waiting nearly ten minutes for a response that never comes.

"Sorry Molly, I should really get going," I tell the girl once returning to her. She nods, thankfully not asking why. I tell everyone goodbye, which takes another ten to fifteen minutes from the many exchanging of numbers and promises to meet again soon. Then I'm practically teleporting to the car, ordering Jeremy to take me to Hadden Tower immediately.

Quinton sounded really upset. Sure, he sounds like a bastard every second of every day, but that was different. That was the exhaustion and defeat I've been hearing more and more lately, only somehow more extreme; a mix of disappointment and frustration. Quinton often sounds frustrated now,

courtesy of my dumb ass, but disappointed? Not so much, and that disappointment lingers in the back of my mind until we reach our destination.

But there's no one here, no one other than the workers that are closing up. I'm quick to step out of the vehicle to speak with the two girls locking the front doors. Both squeak in surprise when I say hello.

"Y-Your Highness," the taller of the two bows at a complete ninety-degree angle. It's honestly impressive. The other is stiff as a board until she catches my eyes and quickly mimics her co-worker.

"We were told you weren't c-coming. Uh, Mr. Underwood left a-about twenty minutes ago," the taller one sputters nervously. The keys jingle in her grasp. I offer a smile in hopes to calm her, which helps the shaking but her co-worker seems to have lost her soul. She's just staring at me with wide eyes.

"Ah, I must have missed his message." I laugh nervously, pretending to check my phone. "Sorry, thank you for staying late to keep it open, anyway."

"Oh, it's fine!" She laughs. "We had fun setting the place up."

The shorter girl nudges her friend, said friend gasps like she accidentally told a secret. In that moment, I realize she did.

"Setting up?" I ask, the strength leaving my limbs. My mind grows numb.

"For you and Mr. Underwood, of course! W-We, uh, had to make sure everything was cleaned up and had a n-nice spot for you to," she points above to the terrace that overlooks the city. "Watch the fireworks."

She's flushing furiously, and so is her friend. But now neither of them can look me in the eye. I'm either getting better at reading people or they are

that easy to read because I know. I know what they were actually setting up, or at least have a strong suspicion. And now I get it;

“Seven o’clock, not long after the parade ends. Don’t be late.”

“Seven o’clock. Hadden Tower.”

“Seven o’clock.”

“Hadden Tower. Seven o’clock.”

Quinton had practically reminded me like it was his damn mantra. He screamed that today was important, that he wanted me here, that he—

A loud crash sounds in the sky. A bright red light flashes from behind, illuminating the terrace, the terrace where I should have been with Quinton at seven o’clock as promised so we could be here together now for... for whatever he had planned. I’m almost hoping it isn’t what I think because, if it was, I don’t know what I’m meant to do now.

Another boom follows, this time blue, then green, casting a glow that once brought a smile to my face every year. Today, though, all I can see with every flash is a mirage of Quinton standing up there alone. Alone because I was too stupid to take the hint. Alone because I’m too scared to… to put us above everyone else every once in a while. No, not even every once in a while, just once. Just once I should have put Quinton as my number one priority no matter what, just like he has done countless times for me. What the hell have I done? I’ve screwed it up. I’ve screwed us up.

“I want to be alone for a while, anyway.”

Of course he does. Of course he fucking does. Aron, you fucking idiot! How could I have been so stupid?! I can’t do anything right for anyone. If I’m the prince, I can’t be Quinton’s lover. If I’m Quinton’s lover, I can’t be the prince. There’s never balance, never enough moments in the day, and I’m not enough to do all of this, any of this.

“Your Highness,” the shorter girl finally speaks. She tilts her head to the side. “Um, if you’d like, we could unlock the doors and let you upstairs. It’s a beautiful view, really.”

“No, thanks.” I don’t think I can handle being up there alone. I don’t think I can go up there without thinking of what might have been, what I desperately wished it would have been, while hoping it isn’t. Because if Quinton planned on... on something like a... proposal, then I’ve done something far worse than I could have imagined.

“Thank you. Please, enjoy the fireworks.” I wave goodbye to them. I’m impressed with myself, being able to hold the sharp breaths until I make it to the car. It’s unbelievably hot. I’m sweating. I can’t breathe. I’m growing dizzy. The car’s too small. I want to run, but I crack open the window instead. I need the fresh air, heaving long breaths that never feel like they’re enough.

“Where to, Your Highness?” asks Jeremy, frowning when he finds me leaning in the back, my head between my legs. I think I’m going to be sick.

“Home,” I grunt, even if I’m fearful of what, or rather who, awaits me there.

The car lurches forward. The fireworks continue above. We are one of very few vehicles in the streets. Friends, families, and loved ones are gathered together to watch the display while I’m alone, a lonely fool trapped in a box of his own making. What the hell have I done?

One of the worst feelings in the world is fearing coming home. A home is meant to be a safe haven; a place to go when times are rough. But when that home may hold the one that you’ve hurt, the one that has made you realize how rough times are, then home is the worst place to be. I can’t avoid it

though, Quinton or my apology. I'll have to get on my knees and beg for forgiveness this time.

I wish my brain wasn't complete shit. I wish I could think of something to say when slowly making my way upstairs. I pass Mom in the library. When our eyes meet, there's sorrow and worry in hers that I'm sure mirror my own. She opens her mouth to speak, but says nothing. That worsens the nerves gnawing at my stomach. I'm tempted to ask her if my fears are true; was Quinton really going to ask tonight? But I fear her answer. I fear everything right now. There's this sudden sense of impending doom, as funny as it sounds. Every step is hesitant, anxious, like my world is slowly caving in and I'm waiting for the inevitable end.

My hand rests on the handle of our bedroom door. I'm not even certain he's home. He could have gone back to his apartment. He said he wanted to be alone for a while. I'm almost hoping he isn't here, just to give me more time to stall. To give me time to step back and maybe write a fucking speech, memorize it then act like this is my senior presentation all over again.

When the door opens, Quinton is there, but not the Quinton I know. There's no confidence. No snark. No smirk. No evidence of the man I've known for nearly eight years, nor the one I've loved for more than half that. Instead, there's a shell of a defeated and exhausted man. He's not even looking at me, merely sitting at his desk with his head in his hands. His hair's a mess, like he's been tearing at it this whole time and, dare I say it, the papers scattered about the desk are wet. Then he sniffles, the softest sound I've ever heard, yet somehow it's more powerful than the fireworks that followed me all the way here.

I can’t speak. I don’t want to. What am I meant to say? What does he want me to say? What am I ever meant to say to anyone? The words that once came so easily to me no longer do.

My entire body trembles. My legs are weak. I have to tell myself to breathe or I may yet forget, especially when Quinton finally sits up straight. His hands fall limp on the table as he turns his head. I really wish he hadn’t. I wish he wouldn’t look at me now.

His eyes are red and puffy like I’ve never seen. His cheeks are slightly damp, but there are no tears. Not now. While his expression is apathetic, the usual mask he wears to conceal what’s actually happening, his eyes can’t hide the truth this time. They’re too red, too sad to hide, yet he still whispers, “Welcome home.”

I want to punch myself in the fucking face, but I don’t. Instead, I whimper, “Quinton, a-about earlier.”

“I told you I’d leave if you were late.” He gets up, brushing his hair back as he strides over to the bed. I go to follow him, but when he faces me, I can’t move. His eyes lock me in place. They’re suddenly so distant, like he’s a million miles away. I think I may have actually pushed him that far this time.

“It’s kind of funny,” he says, but the chuckle that follows may be the saddest sound I ever heard. “Had this happened a few years ago, I honestly think I would have handled it better. I wouldn’t have thought this to be that big of a deal.”

He crosses his arms, as if closing himself off from me. Suddenly, I’m freezing. I can’t feel my fingers or my toes, only the rapid beating of my heart.

“But I can’t do this anymore, Aron.” When Quinton looks at me, I know what he means before he even says more. “I’m tired. I’m so fucking tired of always making excuses for you. Even when I understand, and I knew what we were getting into, I thought we could handle this. Just a few hours ago, I thought I could handle it for the rest of our lives.”

Please stop.

“I guess tonight made me realize I can’t.” Quinton’s voice breaks, but he doesn’t falter. He faces me when he says the most painful words I’ve ever heard, “I’m sorry, but we’re done, Aron. Last time, I did this for you, but this time I’m doing it for me.”

Wait.

“I’ve already requested some staff to move my things to my apartment.” Quinton heads for the door, brushing past me with quick strides. I reach out without even thinking, immediately catching his wrist that he pulls away without hesitation.

The whimper that follows is pathetic. I’m pathetic.

The door opens. I refuse to look. I can’t.

Quinton is near, but his voice is so far away when he says, “I never wanted to throw all your fears back in your face, not again.”

I feel the tears dripping off my chin. When I lower my head, I see them dripping onto the floor.

“Sorry.” That’s the last thing Quinton says.

The door shuts, and my world finally comes crashing down.

I can’t breathe. The world becomes a blur, horrendous sounds of mixed noise lacking any form of sense. My hands tremble. My chest hurts. My head hurts. Everything hurts, as if the world is being crushed around me, forever tightening until there’s no air left. Every breath is a gasp, another

gasp, another hope for another breath that only feels more painful than the last. It's hot then cold, flashes of pain and heat that have me dropping to the floor in a curled up ball.

Is this what dying feels like? I don't know what's going on, only that I want it to stop, that I'm scared, that it feels like I'm losing control of everything. It feels as if my life is slipping through my numb fingers, or being ripped away without remorse. I think I'm crying or maybe I'm screaming. I don't know. I don't know until I finally take the deepest breath I may have ever taken. But even when my breathing levels out, I'm exhausted, like I've been running for miles or days on end.

I roll onto my back, breathing in deep and slow. I'm sweating. My clothes cling to me. I'm still reeling. My fingers are numb. I clench my hand over and over again until I feel them again. When I finally sit up, I'm woozy. I have to lean against the door, the door that reminds me of Quinton, of him leaving and me…having whatever that was.

What the hell was that?

I hold up my hand, watching it continue to tremble as I come down. The only answer I can come up with is—a panic attack. Holy shit, I just had a panic attack. How? Why? I've never had one before. I've never felt so terrified in my whole life. But maybe it makes sense. Lately, I've been more anxious than I've ever been. Lately, I've felt cornered, pressured, tired, and scared. Today, though, today has been on a whole other level. Today, I've successfully ruined the best thing I've ever had. I've ruined a future that I wanted, that Quinton wanted to.

Quinton's gone.

He left. And this time I can't even pretend to be mad at him for it because he's right. He's right to leave. He's right to prioritize himself because I sure

as hell haven’t been. I really haven’t meant to always push him aside, to always push us aside. I hoped that what I have been doing would spare us pain in the future. That I could be a good king, which meant Quinton would be safe at my side, but I can’t do anything right. Either the public is mad at me or Quinton is. Once, I wouldn’t have let this happen. I would have run after him, insisted that we talk and did everything in my power to set things right. I’ve done it before. Why can’t I do it now?

What happened to him? To the boy that went above and beyond, even when he was criticized for it. What happened to the kid that stood tall even amid public scrutiny? What happened to Aron? Because I need him. I need that strength and that courage again. I don’t know where it went or why it left. I need all that back now, more than ever. When did things change so suddenly? When did I change? What happened to Aron fucking Vaughn? It seemed he was all bark and no bite.

Pathetic.

I try to think back to a moment, recalling memories of high school, of laughing with friends without a care in the world. But thinking of high school makes me think of Quinton, of his hand in mine as we walked the school halls proudly. Maybe that’s it—when was the last time I walked with him proudly? When was the last time we showed open affection in public without me flinching like a coward? How many times did Quinton try, and I wouldn’t let him?

“You idiot,” I whisper with my head in my hands and knees up against my chest.

I bury my face in my legs, hands now twisting into my hair when the tears come full force. My panted breaths heat up my legs that soon become damp with tears that won’t stop, no matter how much I plead for them to. I have

to continuously wipe them away until I realize it's pointless and merely sit there, crying alone in our—no. In my room.

"Aron?" Mom's soft voice comes from the opposite side of the door. When I hear the doorknob jiggle, I swiftly reach up to lock it. I actually flinch, feeling like a jackass for locking her out, but I don't want to talk right now.

"Sweetie, are you…" She doesn't finish that question since she must know the answer. She must have already known about Quinton's decision. I imagine she isn't taking it well either. She and Dad adore him. Now, there are two more people disappointed in me. Will the list ever end? Am I doomed to be a failure to everyone?

"What do you need, Aron?" She asks.

I don't answer. I only drag my feet over to the bed. I thought I would feel better after dropping into the soft blankets, but I don't because the bed feels so cold alone.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

There's a void inside my chest that takes and takes until there's nothing left to take. I imagine this is what it feels like to be attacked by a Dementor. All the joy zapped in a swift moment that results in your husk of a self to wander about in a numb state of mind.

That's how I am currently, nothing more than empty and moving about on instinct. I try to shut my mind off, otherwise; I think of Quinton. I think about how much I miss him, although it's only been two days. I think about how his belongings are gone, how I keep saying our or we for things that once belonged to us or what we did together. Then I have to correct myself and continuously rub it in.

Quinton's gone. We're done. And when you lose someone that's been in your life for that long, it's hard not to notice their absence every second of every day.

When I answer a text, I see our old messages. I tell myself to delete the thread, but I can't bring myself to do it. Instead, I read over them because I'm a fucking idiot. I have replaced nothing in our—in my room. Quinton's desk is gone, leaving an empty space where it once sat. All of his little knick knacks sent by people are missing so the shelves and counters are bare. The closet is half empty, an entire open wrack and multiple drawers are completely bare, more reminders, more reasons to make me feel empty too.

Even with this self loathing, I don't cancel any of my appointments once break is over. This has Mom saying, "You aren't going, Aron."

"Why not?" I ask over breakfast, which I haven't touched. The most I've eaten are a few pieces of bread. Anything more than that has made me feel sick. To think the day would come when I can't appreciate food. The world may actually be ending.

"You need a break."

"I have to agree," Dad adds with a firm nod. "You're not up to do anything. I'll tell the press that you're sick. Take a week off, at the very least."

"No." I push my food aside. "I want to keep busy."

Mom sighs. "But that's not good."

"I don't care. I said I'm not staying home, so I'm not!" My chair hits the floor with a loud crash when I abruptly stand. Before either of my parents can argue, I'm storming out of the dining room to head upstairs. My hands tremble when flinging the bedroom door open. Said door slams shut behind me.

I can't stay home. I don't want to. I need to keep busy. I need to keep occupied. If I don't, then I have no fucking clue how I'm going to make it

through this. I don’t know how I’m going to get any rest when rest only results in more sorrow. I don’t want to think. I don’t want to feel anything.

Fuck, now who is the one sounding emo? Suddenly, I’ve taken over Quinton’s job, but I suppose I have to now that he isn’t here. I haven’t felt this lonely in a long time. I’ve forgotten what it felt like.

My phone buzzes. The message from Dad is simple; *All your appointments are canceled. You’re staying home.*

I’m not surprised, but it does piss me off. I can’t stay here, in a room that still smells like Quinton but has nothing symbolizing that he’s still here. I try to keep myself busy by playing games in the arcade room, but the most that happens is me losing, then kicking the shit out of whatever is nearby until my toes throb with pain. Hello darkness my new friend, I wish you’d fucking leave.

But then a distraction ends up coming by. I’m hanging upside down on the couch, glaring at the TV after yet another loss on my game, when the doors open to reveal Autumn. I swing around fast, nearly throwing myself off the couch. Normally that’d get a chuckle from the both of us, but it seems she is well aware of what happened because she looks as solemn as I feel.

“Hey,” she whispers, shutting the door behind her.

“Hey.”

She sits next to me, grabbing a throw pillow to hold in her lap. She picks at the zipper while I continue my game, acting as if I do not know why she’s here. There’s a part of me wanting her to leave because I don’t want to talk. At the same time, all I want to do is talk to her because Quinton has to have told her otherwise she wouldn’t be acting like this.

No one knows yet about what happened, other than my parents and a few workers. The workers involved were asked to keep our separation a secret so we can only hope they do as they're told. I have told none of our friends yet, although I suspect Langley will show up soon. I've been ignoring his texts and calls, which are telling that he, too, knew what Quinton planned to do on New Years. I'm the only idiot that didn't catch the hint.

I'm always the biggest idiot in the room. The disappointing prince who can't keep his loved ones happy or serve his people. Every move is a mistake. I'm the joke, the jester disguising himself as a prince and slowly being caught by everyone who realizes how much of a waste of time I am.

Is Autumn going to talk or am I going to have to start? I don't know if I can. For once, my mouth won't work. Now this is a true miracle, or calamity? Who knows, but it's certainly strange. Normally I can't get myself to shut up, but Autumn still refuses not to say anything.

"How's Quinton?" I ask the first thing that comes to mind, even if his name sends a shiver down my spine.

"How do you think?" Autumn responds with a bit of a bite in her tone. I don't blame her, but her knitted brow states she didn't mean to do that. She sighs. "Sorry, that came out harsh."

"I understand." I finally set my controller aside after ending the game. The TV flicks off and we're stuck in silence. Autumn continues picking at the pillow while I rub my hands together in my lap.

"What did he say to you?" I ask, almost fearfully. Nah, almost is a lie. I'm fucking terrified.

"He didn't need to say anything."

If it's so obvious what happened without a word, then I can only imagine what Quinton is like. He's normally so composed, but I can't get that image

out of my mind. The one of him leaning over the desk, his red eyes and damp cheeks or the pure sorrow laced with every word he spoke. For once, even the dark overlord Quinton could not hide his true feelings. I often wished he would show them more obviously, but that wish had come back to bite me in the ass.

And for Autumn to see how he's feeling so clearly, does that mean he's crying? Is he alone right now? Is he hurting with no one being there with him? Knowing him, he has yet to really talk about it, to even let it sink in. I know Quinton enough to guess how he's handling things and I hate the very idea of him alone in that enormous apartment, knowing that all his plans, all our plans are crumbling into nothing.

Damn it all, I hate it. I hate this so much. I want to run over and see him. I want to hold him and apologize and ask for everything to go back to what it was.

"Do you think I can fix this?" I hate that the question comes out as a whimper.

Autumn freezes. Her response takes a moment of contemplation. Then she sits the pillow aside to look me dead in the eye. "Honestly, I don't know, Aron. I know you want me to make you feel better, but you hurt my best friend. I know you didn't mean to, but you did and... and I think you need to seriously consider what you want from Quinton."

"What?"

"We all know you love each other, even now. This break up has nothing to do with a lack of love, that's for sure." She takes my trembling hand. I didn't even notice I was trembling until I felt how stable her touch was. "But what it is lacking is some stability. Quinton has been doing all the legwork these last few years. He's putting in so much work to be with you,

but you aren’t doing the same. He can’t handle all the pressure on his own, and we all understand why it’s been that way. You’re both in a difficult position, but you have a choice. You always have a choice.”

“A choice that will end in tragedy no matter what I do,” I argue, pulling my hand away to cross my arms defensively. “Whenever I do anything with Quinton, I’m reprimanded, mostly for things that didn’t even happen.”

“Why does that matter so much?” Autumn asks. She shouldn’t have, because it sets me off. As if there was a lock and she just snapped it.

“How the hell could you ask that?! Of course it fucking matters, it always matters! Do you not remember what happened in high school?” I’m glaring at her even if, in the back of my mind, I know I shouldn’t be. “Quinton, Mom, Dad and I were attacked constantly, and still are simply because I am —or I, damn it, I was dating a guy. I’m not someone that can live a normal life, even if I step away from the crown. What do you think will happen?”

Autumn bites her lip and averts her gaze.

“Do you think I haven’t considered it? I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, ever since I was a kid!” I stand, screaming each word until my throat feels raw. “Do you think I’ll suddenly be left alone? No, no, it’ll be all over the news. Queer prince runs from the throne, ending generations of his lineage! The bigots have won, the queers have lost yet again! Do you think I want to go down in history as the queer, *specifically queer*, prince that ran away? The one that ran away with the son of a crazed serial killer, who will never, ever have a fucking moments rest because he was unfortunate enough to choose me?! Do you think I want to let all the kids that look up to me down because I was too much of a coward to face everyone? Do you think I want to let myself down? No! And I sure as hell

don’t want the Coralline’s getting their way! And even if it sucks most of the time, even if politics bore me, I want to be king!”

Autumn blinks rapidly in surprise.

I’m breathing heavily when I finally settle back on the couch. My throat hurts, but I still speak. “I’m not confident if I’ll be any good, but I want to try. I want to do my best to rule, to prove myself... not only to others but also for me because if I fail, then this was all for nothing and I’ve proven that everything they said is true. I want to be king, a good king, not one that’s going to be remembered hundreds of years from now, but one that can at least be known for always doing his best. That’s all I want.”

I throw my head in my hands, feeling the tears trickle through my fingers. “Do you think I’m an idiot?”

“No, not at all.” Autumn throws her arms around me. “I’m sorry I said that. I... I didn’t even think about how you’ve been feeling. I could never imagine.”

Autumn pulls me closer and I cry like an infant in her arms. I told Quinton once that if I had a sister I’d like to have a little sister, but right now I feel like I have a sister and she’s perfect the way she is.

“I wish I had the answers,” she says. Her words are whispered against the top of my head. “But all I can say right now is to give Quinton some space. I think you both need time away from each other to sit back and ask yourselves what you need.”

“I want to be with him.”

“Yes, yes, I know, but that’s what you want. It hurts to say this, but it may not be what you need.”

I go completely rigid in Autumn’s arms. Said arms fall limply in her lap when I pull away, staring down at her with wide eyes.

“You think...Quinton and I aren’t right for each other?” I ask, and the question hurts more than I could ever imagine. Not because I wasn’t expecting it, but because I’ve been thinking about it for a while but coming up with every excuse I could to deny it.

“I didn’t say that,” she whispers, though she can’t hide the truth. She knows it too. This time, she’s the one averting her gaze. “Quinton has changed since meeting you, Aron. You both have, but Quinton has gone above and beyond. You know it too.”

I do. He’s not the same person I met in sophomore year. There’s a new sort of kindness to him, a new kind of affection and joy that wasn’t always there. He’s more open, still not as much as myself or most people, but Quinton can make friends without me. He can smile and laugh without worrying about what others will think. He’s more confident in himself too, when it comes to his past and his future. I couldn’t be more proud, but this change has led to Quinton also wanting more.

He’s more open to affection and thus expects it more, which I haven’t been giving. He’s more confident in himself, which leads to his desire to proudly show us off as a couple. He wants to hold hands and kiss in public. He wants to go on dates. I do too, but I don’t have that same confidence, not anymore.

That’s not even bringing up school. How he wants to keep moving up and keep going for another goal that may be out of reach should he stay with me. This has been an issue for some time, one we kept ignoring until it’s gotten to this point, a point of possibly no return.

“Spending some time away from each other may help you realize what you need to do next hoping to mend this, if you can mend this,” she adds with a hopeful smile that fades when my eyes lock with hers. She must see

the despair that's eating me alive. She's quick to say, "Listen, Aron, I don't want you giving up. I don't think Quinton wants you to, either."

"He broke up with me, remember?"

"Yes, and he had every right to, but you can't honestly believe that he isn't as desperate to try again as you are. I know he is. I doubt you can get him to come back right now, but after you both have some space, maybe you can work on being a couple again?"

"And what if he moves on before that happens?"

Autumn is so taken aback she actually hiccups. I would laugh, but I can't seem to remember how.

"What... why would you ask that?" She questions.

"Seems he's gotten close to some people at school. He may find someone else."

"I don't think Quinton is going to be looking for a new relationship anytime soon."

"We weren't looking for a relationship when ours started."

"That's different."

"Is it?" I ask. "Isn't that a thing? Finding love when you aren't looking for it."

"Is this your answer, then?" She brushes her hair back with a heavy sigh. "You don't want to wait and hopefully try again?"

"I don't know if I have the right to."

"Of course you do. Aron, you've been so down on yourself lately."

I know that, but I can't help it. Lately, all I've been doing is messing up, to the point that I can't even find an excuse for it. I hate what I see in the mirror. I hate the sound of my voice.

"You need to stop trying to be something you're not," she adds.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snap, brows furrowed in frustration. I can’t seem to decide what I want to be; angry or sad. I’m flickering like a dying light, and Autumn doesn’t appreciate it. She purses her lips.

“You’re always trying to be someone that others want you to be rather than being yourself.”

“Being myself sucks.”

“See! That—that’s the problem!” Autumn points accusingly. I feel a lecture coming on, but I’m not in the mood. I’m not in the mood for much of anything other than moping and eating a tub of ice cream until my brain freezes and hopefully shuts the hell up. So before Autumn can drag me into a heart felt lecture, I stand up.

“Thanks for coming over, but I’m going to take a much needed nap.”

“Aron, wait.”

“If Quinton needs anything, anything at all, let me know.”

“Aron!”

I shut the doors behind me, cutting Autumn off. She doesn’t follow and I’m grateful for that.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Does anyone really know how to deal with a breakup? Is there a How to Handle a Break Up manual, one preferably centering on a blonde-haired idiot getting over his one and only relationship that was more serious than he ever expected? If not, I will happily pay a handsome price for that manual because I am, for lack of a better word, fucked.

Fucked in the sense that I've become what I once made fun of from films and TV shows; a complete dumbass trying to cover his problems and insecurities with work. Because your problems aren't there if you're too busy thinking about everything else! Healthy coping mechanisms, am I right? Hahaha...ha…

I miss Quinton.

No matter how much I try to act like I don't, no matter how much I fix my schedule to work me to the bone, the thought is always there. Lingering.

Festering. So I push myself harder until there's a routine. Work. Class. Home. Work. Class. Home. Work. Class. Home.

Another day, the same routine, all filled to the brim with tedious assignments to keep me occupied until I drop the moment I get home. I don't sleep though. I lay there in the cold and empty bed that had never felt so cold and empty before. I always rest with my back to the door, even when my side aches or my leg goes numb, because I don't want to be reminded of Quinton's absence. The lack of warmth, though, that I can't hide at all. My back is cold and my fingers twitch with the desire to hold him.

I can't help but to think how humorous Quinton would find this situation if it were different. If I told him I was cold without him or that I wanted to hold him, he would have teased me. Yeah, I would have teased him too—that was our thing. I can hear him and see that stupid cocky smirk of his, and it makes me miss him even more. Yet more teasing would have ensued and, honestly, I'd take that teasing over this deafening silence any day of the year. To think the day would come when I missed Satan. Oh, how far I've fallen.

I close my eyes, but rest never really takes me. In a sense, I've become a bit of a hermit. Scratch that. I am definitely a hermit. If it doesn't pertain to work or tests, then I don't leave my room. I'm here, in my bed with the TV on. I'm not taking in any information. If I said that out loud Quinton would probably argue that I'm never taking in any information. At this rate, I'm going to start having conversations with someone that isn't even here. Well, I've been told I'm strange. Why not act a bit more of the part?

It's been like this for a month. An entire month of silence. No calls. No texts. Nothing.

And my birthday is tomorrow.

Once, I looked forward to it. Once, I counted down the days. Childhood was so nice, wasn't it? Birthdays were the coolest thing ever. A day to celebrate you, you, you! And you bet my cocky, self indulgent ass enjoyed that as a kid. Getting a year older, a day of presents, friends and copious amounts of junk food was textbook birthday, but birthdays change as you get older. Sometimes junk food and presents are replaced with alcohol, but friends are usually always involved.

Not for me, though. Not this year. Certainly not from their lack of trying, though. I shut my phone off yesterday after all the calls, insisting that I make plans or at least get out of my room. I hung up on everyone. I thought I'd be ok with that, but as I lay here in the silent, dark night, there's too much. Too much of everything and nothing. Too much of Quinton, wanting to hear from him, wanting to see him, wanting to spend tomorrow with him like all our birthdays before. Where would we have gone? What would we have done?

...would I have canceled again?

Fuck this. I can't handle it.

I throw myself out of bed and head for the kitchen. This isn't a good idea. I know it isn't, but I'm desperate. I want to get some sleep and this entire month I haven't had a moment of rest. Mom and Dad are practically trying to superglue my feet to the palace floor, hoping to keep me home. They're canceling appointments, but I'm making more. I don't have appointments tomorrow though, at least not any that involves leaving, and that's a good thing because I'm going to get wasted.

Do you know what a poor combination is? A break up, a phone, alcohol, and a very drunk Aron. Congratulations, you've guessed it! I am totally

calling Quinton at two am on my birthday, wasted as all hell. There are empty bottles that tumble off the bed when I flop onto it. They clatter on the floor and I giggle into the blankets, red faced and warm.

The phone's ringing. I roll onto my back, humming a song and holding my hand in my hair. Quinton doesn't answer, how rude! I'm the birthday boy. You shouldn't ignore the birthday boy, that is, like, a rule or something. I don't know who made that rule, but it's a good rule.

"Hey!" I shout into the receiver, words so slurred that only a drunk mind can understand them. "Hey, hey, hey, why aren't ya answerin' for the birthday boy, hmm? Ya rotten bastard!" I sit up fast, stumbling right out of bed onto the floor.

"Ow," I grunt and sit crossed leg on the carpet. "Why aren't ya answerin'? Hmm? Hey, Quinny, Quinny, do ya know what t'day is?" I laugh and the sound comes out rattled when it turns into a hiccup, then a cry.

I'm crying. Why am I crying again? My brain is fuzzy. The world is blurry. I was happy just a second ago, but now it hurts. Everything. All of it. Like someone reached into my mind, found every happy memory and took it away, leaving me cold and dark. My chest aches. My breaths come in chopped and erratic, sniffles mixing in with soft hiccups as I wipe the tears from my face.

"Do you…mm-know what today is?" I ask again, like I expect him to answer, like I want him to answer. "It's my birthday."

I bring my legs up to my chest, pressing my forehead against my knees. My voice echoes around me. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Quinton, really, I promise I'll do better. I can. I will. Why don't we just...why don't we just leave? We can leave y'know wherever you wanna go. Far away, as long as we're together, that's all I want. That's all I—"

The voicemail cuts me off.

My phone is chucked into the void and I pass out.

“Is he dead? I think he’s dead.”

“He’s not dead, but he sure as hell smells like it.”

“Don’t be so tough on him, guys. He’s been through a lot lately.”

“He’s putting us through a lot with this damn stench.”

I don’t know who’s here, but they’re worsening my pounding headache, so I’m ten seconds away from throwing them into a crocodile pit. I don’t have one, but I’ll order one to be made specifically for them.

Slowly, my eyes open only to make me hiss at the sunlight that’s about to burn said eyes right out of their sockets, full face melting, Indiana Jones style. Luckily, or unluckily, I’m feeling pretty shit. My skin remains attached. Groaning, I hold up my arm, hearing jumbled voices until my vision returns and I find myself surrounded like a virgin about to be slaughtered to Satan. Only Satan is missing, and that shouldn’t be upsetting, but it is.

Langley, Ariel, Cassidy, Nora, and Autumn huddle around the bed. Dahlton is the only helpful one walking around the room with a trashcan to pick up the empty snack wrappers and bottles. Quinton is absent.

“Oh, he lives,” Langley declares, snickering. He has no remorse because he smacks me on the stomach, which is not a good idea. My stomach churns. My eyes practically bulge out of my skull. There’s acid in my throat.

“Dahlton!” Autumn screams, gesturing for him to come running over. The boy barely makes it in time with the trash can for me to throw up in.

“This is not the fun birthday party we were promised,” Cassidy remarks, holding her hands over Nora’s eyes like a mother shielding her child from

sin. I suppose me puking my guts out in a trashcan after a long night of drinking would fall under the sinful category.

“That’s what you get for not inviting me to drink,” Langley says, rubbing my back soothingly until I’ve finished. “Hopefully, this has taught you to drink responsibly.”

“It’s less responsible if you’re involved,” Ariel says, giggling at the shock that I’m sure Langley is showing her.

“Everyone, please stop yelling.” I groan, throwing my hands over my ringing ears. “My head is killing me.”

“We aren’t yelling. You’ve just got a severe case of the hangovers,” Autumn says. Dahlton is frozen next to her, like a man that has seen some shit that he will never unsee. His arms are straight as boards, still holding the rather full trash can that smells awful. Or maybe that’s me, who really knows at this point, sure as hell not me.

Autumn ties up the trash bag and leaves with Dahlton to take out the trash. Nora is the only true caring friend I have. She sits beside me, rubbing my back while asking, “Do you need some water? Maybe some crackers?” She looks at Cassidy. “Check the medicine cabinet for some aspirin or something.”

“Nah.” Cassidy smirks. “Let him suffer.”

“Cass.”

She spins on her heel and does as told, not because she cares but because she doesn’t want to end up on the couch. Like I said, my only genuine friend anymore is Nora!

“What are you all doing here?” I ask around with another groan. The right side of my mouth is crusted. There’s a spot of wet on my pillow. I was drooling in my sleep. Great.

“What do you think?” Ariel laughs. She hops onto the bottom of the bed, crossing her legs. “We would not let you be alone on your birthday.”

“I said I didn’t want to do anything.”

Langley sighs. His eyes are firm when he says, “You’ve been saying you don’t want to do anything for a month, but you need to do something, Aron. Not work or school, something fun with friends, watch a movie, something.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“We’re worried about you,” Nora says so honestly that I can’t even respond. She smiles warmly when taking my hand. “We just wanted to make sure that you’re ok and, after coming over,” she looks around the room that is now mostly clean, thanks to Dahlton. “It’s obvious that you’re not, and that’s ok, it’s understandable. You don’t need to feel like you have to be cheerful around us. If you want to go out, we’ll go with you, but if you just want to watch TV in silence, then we’ll do that with you too, ok?”

She pulls me in for a hug before the first tear even falls. Ariel smiles while Langley stares at the ceiling, because I can totally see the tears building up in his eyes. I know him. As soon as someone starts crying, he does the same.

Cass has returned with a wet rag I use to clean my face and some headache. There’s nothing to drink here though, nothing but the half empty beer on my end stand, which I refuse to touch. I’m pretty sure I’m good to not touch alcohol for at least the next year, thank you very much!

Langley heads for the door. “I’ll go get you something to drink.”

“Aren’t you just leaving so you won’t cry along with me?” I tease, earning a middle finger from him, at least until he opens the door. Then he freezes. We all do.

Quinton’s there.

He doesn’t even allow me a moment to register whether this is a dream. Maybe I drank so much I’m in a coma, or even dead. He approaches me, though I don’t know if it’s really him. I think if this were a dream, I wouldn’t be in this situation. I think he’d already be in bed with me, smiling instead of wearing that apathetic facade that I hate during a time like this. He has a water bottle in hand that he holds out to me. I expect it to be fake. I expect my fingers to go right through the bottle, but they don’t. His fingers brush against mine. I don’t know how I resist pulling him in. I want to. I want to so bad.

I thought I missed him before. I don’t have the words to explain how much I miss him now, although he’s standing right in front of me.

Then Autumn’s voice cuts through the tension, “Ok, that’s the hint for us to get a movie ready in the lounge. Let’s go, everybody out!”

She whistles like a damn drill sergeant, swinging her arm in the doorway. I’m not even mad about how that makes my head pound even more. I’m too busy watching Quinton then realizing how fucking ridiculous I look.

I spin around fast, pulling the blanket with me in order to hide my shame. Shit, what do I even look like? I furiously rub my face again with the rag, then touch my knotted hair. I don’t need a mirror to know my eyes are probably bloodshot. My breath, let’s not even go there. It fucking reeks. I reek. I smell like straight alcohol.

“We’ll be in the lounge when you’re ready,” Autumn adds. I don’t know what sort of response Quinton gives, none most likely. Maybe he nodded or shrugged. I’m uncertain as I refuse to turn around.

When the door clicks shut, I know we’re alone, and yet this is the first time that I truly haven’t actually felt alone. Although there’s dread and

worry, there's also excitement. Even if I'm not looking at him, I'm so damn happy Quinton's here. And don't you dare tell the bastard that! Makes me feel like a complete idiot, a simpleton, but I guess that's what I've always been. Ain't surprising to feel this way now.

I'm glad he's here, in a twisted way. I've wanted to see him, but I'm scared of what I might do. I'm scared that I'll beg for forgiveness, only to be shot down. I'm scared I'll hold him or kiss him, only to realize he no longer wants it. He needs to leave or I may shatter into a million pieces.

"You really shouldn't drink," he finally speaks.

"And you really shouldn't be here."

He's quiet. I hate that it's quiet.

"I... I didn't mean that," I whisper, twisting my fingers into the blanket.

"Should I leave then?" he asks.

The bed dips. When my eyes close, I envision Quinton behind me. Knowing that he's there is comforting and confusing in ways I can't explain. Something taps my shoulder. I turn slightly to find the water bottle hovering at my side.

"Drink first then I'll go," he says to which I spin around so fast I twist myself into the blanket and fall sideways onto the bed. Quinton smirks. I want to kiss him, and had I not been twisted in this damn blanket, I probably would have.

"Idiot," he says, the age-old insult makes my heart skip a beat. Why oh why am I like this? When he reaches out to help me, though, I smack his hand away. I regret it instantly, watching his eyes darken. I want to apologize, but he doesn't give me the time to think. He drops the water bottle on the bed and stands, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I should get going. I only wanted to make sure you weren't alone on your birthday."

Quinton heads for the door again.

He’s about to leave again.

I don’t know what to say again.

I don’t want him to. I want him to stay. I want everything to go back to the way it was. I want his desk back so the room isn’t so empty. I want all his weird science equipment that I don’t understand. I want his clothes in the closet and books on the nightstand. I want him here, with me, all the time. And it’s those thoughts that drive me to call out to him, “Wait a second!”

I stumble over my own feet around the bed. The blanket drops, resting behind me as I stand in the center of the room with Quinton lingering at the door. When he faces me, I feel small, like I’ve shrunk a thousand times over. I’m another specimen of his in a petri dish that he’s waiting to see how it will react to whatever he chooses to throw at it.

“Is...is it too much to ask for you to stay?” I wish I didn’t whimper that out, but lately I’ve been wishing for a lot of things that never turn out, so yeah, life is shit.

Quinton has always been impressive with his ability to keep his eyes on someone even in times of distress. But maybe he isn’t distressed. Maybe he’s over me and this is easy. He’s just taking care of me out of pity and slight respect for the years we shared.

“Do you think it’s a good idea for me to stay?” He responds.

At least that tells me I’m being hard on myself again. His tone is soft and caring, one he wouldn’t give out of pity or even slight respect. And if he still cares, maybe there really is a chance, a chance to mend what I’ve colossally fucked up.

“I don’t know. I don’t seem to have very many good ideas lately.”

Quinton glances at the beer can on my end stand. “So I’ve noticed.” He returns to looking at me. “You haven’t been giving yourself a break to come up with any ideas lately, either.”

So he’s noticed—how I’ve been working even more lately. Burying myself in whatever I can because it’s better to be busy than numb. I shouldn’t be thinking about how that means he’s continuing to check up on me, but my love-struck self can’t seem to fixate on anything other than that.

“You’ve been paying attention to me?” I ask.

“Contrary to your belief, I am not a demon.”

“Debatable.”

Quinton rolls his eyes. “Yes, I’ve been paying attention. I wish you’d pay more attention to yourself.”

Ouch, but I get it.

“Don’t drink again,” he says, then points to the water bottle, which I quickly pick up and chug. Once done, he adds, “And take some time off, for everyone’s sake.”

“I don’t think I can,” I admit, staring at the clear water spinning in the bottle that I continue to twirl faster with every word. “When I’m not busy, I don’t know what to do with myself. I just end up sitting around thinking about how much I miss you, how empty the room is, how cold the bed is, and if there’s any way for me to fix it or if I even have the right to ask if I can.”

The tears and quiet sobs return, only this time they’re buried against Quinton’s shoulders when he moves across the room to suddenly wrap his arms around me. I’m assaulted by him; his touch and his warmth and his scent and his voice tickling my ear. It’s intoxicating.

“I don’t know,” he whispers, holding me so tight that it hurts, but I omit it because I don’t want him letting go. “If we want to think of this as a break, if that helps in any way, then we can, but I honestly don’t know if we can be fixed.”

My voice cracks when I ask, “Can I at least try?”

“Aron—”

“We can start over as friends, just friends. I don’t—I don’t know if I can handle nothing at all. I haven’t been handling nothing at all very well.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Quinton repeats around a sad chuckle that I mirror. My fingers twist into his jacket so tightly that I may yet rip it.

“Fine,” he whispers, sounding as hesitant as I feel. “Just friends then.”

Quinton pulls away. My arms fall limp at my side. It’s cold again, but not as cold as it once was.

“Get a shower. You reek.” He pushes me towards the bathroom. “I’ll be in the lounge.”

“You’re staying?” I ask, watching Quinton head for the door but finally feeling a little at ease about it.

“The birthday boy is already mad at me about not answering his call,” Quinton says around a wry smile thrown over his shoulder. A wry smile that has my eyes widening. “You really shouldn’t drink.” He closes the door on my stuttering self that pulls out my phone to see I called Quinton twelve times last night, and I don’t remember a single one.

You fool!

There’s cake and ice cream on the end stands and coffee tables. Super Mario Kart is on screen with Ariel and Langley vs. Cassidy and Nora. Autumn and Dahlton sit with Quinton on the loveseat. Autumn is literally squished between them, but she refuses to move and refuses to let them

move. Quinton has yet to accept Dahlton into the pack based on his snarl and narrow eyes that are far worse than usual today.

Am I cocky to think it may have to do with me?

The only time his snarl leaves is when our eyes meet, like right now. I'm on the couch next to Langley, but my eyes are on Quinton. They're always on Quinton. Our gazes meet and I swear the world disappears. I can't hear anything other than my own breaths. I see nothing other than Quinton watching me with a quiet stare. His expression is unreadable, but at least he's here. Even if I'm not next to him, I'm relieved that he's here, eating cake, telling me happy birthday, playing games, like maybe, maybe there really is a chance.

If I keep working at it. If I get over my fear of the public and the council members, of disappointing everyone, including myself, maybe I can get back the best thing that's ever happened to me. There's finally a spark of hope in my chest rather than anger and I'm remembering what it's like to feel anything other than that, which has been sorely needed. But I am truly a sucker for punishment because my mind reminds me it shouldn't have taken all this to make me realize that I've been doing something wrong.

Quinton breaking up with me shouldn't have made me finally go, ah, I dun goofed. My dumbass should have figured that out prior to this. I should have already been trying to fix things, but I kept messing up. And, say we get back together, what will stop me from messing up again?

Here comes depression. I'm thinking of depression as a person. I imagine they're a lot less gloomy and more like a vindictive punk that's always grinning with mischievous intent because they damn well know what they're doing to us.

“You want a turn, Aron?” Langley asks, breaking me from my somber thoughts by waving the controller in my face.

I’m desperate for a distraction, so I nod. “Sure.”

Video games really are the best distraction. I don’t know nor care who I’m playing against, so long as I’m playing. But I am not at my best because I come in third and it’s Nora that ends up laughing, “Wow, Quinton actually won a game!”

She points excitedly at the screen, showing that Quinton did, in fact, get first place. Against me, no less. The room suddenly goes quiet because we all know, if everything was normal, this is where Quinton would give a snarky remark and I’d reply with even more snark. We’d argue and toss insults and everyone would laugh.

But that doesn’t happen.

Quinton hands the controller to Autumn. She clears her throat, unsuccessfully ending the tension. If anything, it’s worse, what with me refusing to face Quinton or to give up the controller until Langley asks, “You wanna play another round?”

“No.” I practically throw the controller at him, but he catches it. It’s up to them to heighten the mood, which never really returns to what it used to be. Although we’re all finally together, laughing and joking around, there are two left out of the group. We’re only physically here.

Just friends is already off to a pretty rocky start, especially since Quinton and I weren’t “just friends” for very long even before this. We hated each other, then we kind of agreed to tolerate each other, then we exchanged hand jobs over spring break and wadabing, wadabam, here we are.

“Hey,” Langley practically stabs me in the side with his finger. I yelp and glare at him until he leans in to whisper, “I’m staying over tonight.”

“What?”

“We’re making a battle plan.”

“For?”

Langley holds up his fist like a determined warrior when he growls in a deep voice, “Winning back Quinton.”

“Are you serious?”

“You two have obviously worked something out,” he says, continuing to whisper while the others play their games. I can’t help but to continuously glance at Quinton, which only has Langley grinning. “You’re at least talking now, right?”

“Oh yes, we’re definitely talking. Have you noticed how much we talked today?”

“Don’t get sassy with me.”

“I still have a hangover.”

Langley pinches my cheek. “That’s your own fault.”

I smack his hand away, falling back onto the couch with my arms crossed. “It’s fine, Langley. We... we’re going for just friends.”

“For now.” Langley leans his side against the couch. His voice has turned serious. “But you still love each other. You know that he still loves you, right?”

“We’ll see how long that lasts, especially when I inevitably screw up again.”

“Quinton already knew we were all coming over, you know,” he says with a wide smile when I stare wide-eyed at him. “We called and asked him to come along. He said no, but showed up, anyway. He’s just as troubled about this as you are and him coming over is proof that, although you broke up, he wants you back, too.”

“But—”

“But nothing. This is just another hurdle. We all have them.”

“But we keep having them.”

“Then take this time as *just friends* to give it some serious thought.”

Autumn said something similar, and if they both think that’s the best course of action, then maybe it is. Only I don’t know where to start with these serious thoughts. Y’all know I ain’t the best at that, right? I’m the least serious person in this room. And serious thought of what? Us? What I plan to do in the future? What we plan to do in the future? We were on the same page there for a while and we were one step closer to that future until I screwed it up, like I screw everything up. As soon as I get my hands on something grand, I turn it to ash.

Langley pats me on the shoulder with a wide smile. “We’re all here for the both of you. Stop trying to take all the burden alone. Quinton did that once with Raina, remember?”

I throw my head back over the couch at the memory. “Yeah. He drove me nuts.”

“So you know best that it’s no good to take on all the burden alone. Let this love guru teach you a thing or two about winning back hearts.”

“You have only ever been with Ariel, so I don’t think you have much experience.”

“Shh, you’re angering the love guru.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The self-proclaimed love guru does, in fact, stay the night. Once the sad excuse of a birthday party—that I am still grateful for—ends, it is only me and Langley sitting crossed leg on my bed.

Reminds me of when we were kids, when we built pathetic lego ships or battled pokemon, only there's no fun and games tonight. It's crazy to think how I'm not even up to it. Fun and games is my thing. It's always been my thing. The prince that's always a floundering mess is now a quiet and internal floundering mess. It ain't right, and that's obvious to everyone.

I didn't walk Quinton out earlier, even if I desperately wanted to. I didn't even say goodbye, just waved when he got up to leave with Autumn and Dahlton. I wish I could have done more, but I knew if I even attempted to open my mouth, I would have whimpered like an injured dog. If Quinton cared, he didn't show it.

“We don’t have to talk about anything if you don’t want to,” Langley says, garnering my attention.

“What?” I ask. “Isn’t that the point of you staying over, to talk?”

“We don’t have to though,” he explains around a crooked smile. “I just didn’t want you to drink again, honestly.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan to.”

“That’s what we all say until we’re alone and there’s nothing to do other than drink.” Langley averts his gaze nervously. “We’ve all been there, or we all will be at some point. Shit happens. Sometimes it happens when you least expect it. Sometimes it’s so sudden you don’t know how to handle it, even if it isn’t sudden you can’t handle it. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you and Ariel, is there?” I ask after hearing his sorrowful voice. “We don’t need another fucked up relationship in the group,” I try to tease, happy to see Langley smile.

“Nothing’s wrong with me and Ariel, but you know there have been before.”

I nod, recalling our freshman year of college. Long-distance relationships suck. Langley and I share a distaste for them. He and Ariel had their rough spots and, just like he’s here for me, I was there for him, although the drinking thing is certainly a first.

“I don’t know what to do,” I admit with my head lowered. “What will change if Quinton forgives me? We’ll still have the same issues, paparazzi, the public, the council, his career, my duties. I can’t change any of it.”

“It’s not about changing any of that. It’s about changing how you handle it.”

“I think you’re trying to sound smart, but I don’t have a clue what you mean.”

“That just means I am sounding smart and you,” Langley jabs me in the forehead. “Are an idiot.”

“You have spent too much time with Quinton. You sound just like him.”

“I think you just miss him so much that you see him everywhere.” Langley laughs. I’m grateful that he isn’t treating me like glass, like I’ll shatter if he so much as touches me, although I admit that I feel that way. Like at any moment, I’ll crack and scatter piece by piece until there’s nothing left.

Oh, I should join a band, write some sad emo songs about my lost love, hit the road with my guitar, and come back with a smoking hot bod, tattoos, and smelling of cigarettes. Lifetime would make a movie out of that shit!

“Since you two are on a break.”

“You mean since we’re broken up,” I correct him, to which he shakes his head.

“It’s a damn break and we all know it. You think Quinton planned to propose, then broke it off like it was nothing? You, of all people, know him better than that. Now, let the love guru finish.”

I hold my hands up in defense. “I only interrupted you once. You’re the one making a big deal out of it.”

“Since you’re on a break,” Langley points accusingly at me. “B-R-E-A-K, break.”

“You can spell?”

He smacks me over the head, which is still aching in case anyone cares. “You must use this time to plan new ways to avoid what happened leading up to this moment.”

“There’s nothing really to do, though? We had plans and even when someone reminds me, I’m bombarded with everything and either forget or arrive late.”

“Then we have to make sure you aren’t bombarded anymore,” Langley says confidently. “You realize you take on way more responsibilities than you have to, right?”

“For good reason.” This is the talk with Autumn all over again, but Langley doesn’t let me speak.

“So being there for Quinton isn’t a good reason to lessen some of those responsibilities?” He asks, watching me with a heavy stare that knocks the breath from my lungs.

“Of course not,” I mumble, staring at the blanket since I can’t face Langley, or anyone for that matter. “But it’s not that simple.”

“No shit, if it was, then we wouldn’t be here, but my point is you need to cut things off bit by bit.”

“Cutting what off?”

“Everything,” he says. “You aren’t obligated to do all these interviews and go to all these events. Even your parents have mentioned that they want you to let up. It’s great you’re getting all this experience, but you’ve said it yourself before. You won’t ascend to the throne until you’re probably in your forties. Your dad is more than capable of handling things on his own from time to time, so, from time to time, you need to back off.”

“But the Coralline’s—”

“Will call you out even if you were to cure cancer and solve world hunger. You can’t please everybody, Aron, so you need to put pleasing yourself first.”

“But I’ve done that before,” I’m quick to argue. This time it’s Langley that’s confused. He frowns when I mumble, “I put myself above others for a long time, you know that. I was a spoiled brat, the way I treated Quinton before... I don’t want to end up like that again.”

“You know we did that together, right?” Langley sighs. “I was as rude to him as you were.”

“Because you followed everything I said.”

“I had the choice to say no, and I didn’t, and the fact that you know what we did was wrong now is already proof that you won’t be that way again. Being selfish isn’t always a bad thing, sometimes it’s the best thing you can do.” Langley grips me by the shoulders and looks me in the eye when he says, “It’s time you start being more selfish, Aron.”

I don’t really get it, but that isn’t anything new.

“And to start, you’re going to message Quinton,” Langley says when grabbing my phone from the end stand.

I snatch said phone from his grubby little hands when hissing, “Excuse you, bitch?”

“Don’t call me bitch, bitch.”

“I’ll call you bitch if you’re being a bitch, which you are, bitch.” I hide my phone between my legs. “What do you mean, message Quinton?”

“I’m not saying to send him a dick pic.” Langley snickers, probably because of my blushing, which is about to burn my face off. “But you’re *just friends* now, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you should text your friend and thank him for coming to your birthday party like a good birthday boy.”

“I’m not fucking five.”

“I don’t think many five-year-olds text their friends to thank them for coming to a birthday party, so that makes very little sense.”

“Your face makes little sense.”

“Because it’s so good looking that you can’t comprehend how someone as perfect as me exists?”

I kick Langley off the bed. He howls before he even hits the floor, then crawls right back up.

“I told you,” he grunts while rubbing his hip. “Tonight we plot to win back Quinton.”

“You make it sound like he broke up with the both of us.”

“It’s starting to damn well feel like it with how awkward it is in the friend group.” Langley grimaces. “I never thought the day would come when I would miss hearing his snarky remarks, but I’d take that over both of your awkward silences.”

“No argument there.”

“Get to texting,” Langley orders when pointing at my phone. I don’t pick it up, though, which brings about a scowl. “Friends text all the time.”

“But we’re friends that just recently broke up. Isn’t it weird to send a text?”

“You two are a weird case, so snap to it.” Langley literally snaps his fingers until I give in.

And by give in, I mean I finally pick up my phone. When the device turns on, I’m met with a picture that only makes this even more difficult; my background is a picture of me and Quinton at Christmas. Mom got Quinton to wear pajamas with reindeer on them, then slammed a pair of antlers on him. He was not pleased, but I was. I sat beside him as an elf with wrapping

paper scattered across the floor. I've been tempted to change it, but can't bring myself to do it even if it hurts to see.

"What do I say?" I ask.

"What I told you, thank him for coming over. Keep it simple and see if he replies."

"What do I say if he replies?"

"Aron, we both know Quinton is the one that struggles to communicate with the rest of the human race. We cannot function if you follow in his footsteps."

I sit the phone aside. "I can't do it."

Langley grins but it is not kind when he asks, "Do you want me to text him?"

"Hell no." I bring up my messages before Langley can attempt to steal my phone. Keep it simple, keep it simple, Aron. Simple. You can do simple, right?

Aron: Thanks for coming over today.

I show the text to Langley, who hits send before I can even panic about doing so. My jaw drops.

"You jerk," I hiss, staring at the sent message that—oh crap—is already read. I look at Langley with wide eyes. "He already read it."

"Nice."

"What if he doesn't reply?"

"Try texting him an—"

Quinton replied.

Quinton: Don't drink tonight, idiot.

Leave it to Quinton to completely ignore my text and insult me, yet I'm smiling. Leave it to me to smile about it. How am I becoming even more

hopeless? The years have not been kind.

“You going to respond?” Langley asks after I’ve stared at the message for some time. Somehow, texting has become complicated. Who knew something once so simple could feel like I’m taking a damn test!

Wait, déjà vu anyone? I panicked when texting Quinton for the first time years ago. Now I’m panicking again. This demonic bastard is going to be the death of me.

“What if he doesn’t want to talk?” I grumble, though my fingers hover over the screen.

“He wouldn’t have responded if he didn’t want to talk.”

Langley’s right. I know he’s right, but I’m still trembling.

Aron: No worries, I learned my lesson. Langley’s keeping me company, anyway.

Quinton: That annoyance only gives you more reason to drink.

Am I meant to respond? Is it ok to continue texting?

I glance at Langley as if he has the answers, as if he even knows the question, but he’s not paying attention to me. He has turned away, and is now facing the TV that he flips on. Maybe he knows what I’m thinking. Maybe that’s why he turned away, why he’s acting like he isn’t aware of me swiftly texting back.

Aron: Careful. I may tattle to that annoyance.

Quinton: That’s hardly a threat.

Aron: You say that until he gets his hands on you.

Quinton doesn’t respond immediately, though. He’s read my text. I’m left waiting impatiently, my eyes glued to my phone as if it is a lifeline. A minute passes, then five, then nearly ten.

Quinton: I have some work to do.

So he doesn’t want to talk, I figured as much. Why would he?

Aron: Ok, sorry, I didn’t mean to be a bother.

Quinton: That’s not what I meant. We can talk later. Goodnight.

Not what I meant. Talk later, right? I doubt it. I shouldn’t have messaged. Damn it. Without really thinking about it, I swiftly respond, except I should know better. I need to think about things before I do them because my eyes widen after I’ve hit send.

Aron: Ok, night, love you.

You dumb son of a bitch. I think my heart has actually jumped out of my throat and flew to Jupiter!

Aron: Fuck

Sorry

Habit

Sorry

I’m left to panic for nearly five minutes before Quinton replies.

Quinton: It’s fine.

Except it isn’t fine. It isn’t fine at all.

Langley said to start cutting things off. I’ve thought about it these last two weeks, contemplating if I can handle the heat. I don’t know. I’m scared and worried and stressed, but when I finally bring it up, Dad immediately agrees.

“That’s a great idea, Aron,” he says at breakfast. His hair is a mess and eyes are only half open when he sips his coffee. “You don’t need to be running around all the time. I’ll tell Haddie to cut back your appointments.”

“And steer clear of social media,” Mom adds, shaking her head. “It’s not going to be good for you, especially now.”

“Hmm.” I hum, poking mindlessly at my breakfast.

That’s putting it lightly. I’m already aware of the rumors circulating online. Quinton and I haven’t been seen out in public together. My stupid self checked twitter and, of course, have read theories speculating towards a break up. The real news has yet to break, and I’m not entirely sure when we plan to do so. Since we haven’t, that gives me hope; hope that Quinton really is waiting to see if we can fix us. However, there is currently an... issue, if I even have the right to call it that.

Mystery Man has returned! That’s right, more pictures of Quinton with the brunette that caused me some mental struggles not too long ago have reappeared. There’s plenty of them, with many claiming that the two have practically been attached at the hip recently. Oh, how I wish I could be the considerate and understanding male lead from a cheesy romance novel that would never hate on someone that didn’t deserve it, but I’m not.

Fuck this guy. Whoever he is, I don’t like him. His eyes are too small and his nose is too sharp. He looks like a damn model, so why can’t he just go off to fashion week in Paris or something? Get away from Quinton, you dumb sack of shit.

But alas, I don’t have the right to say that or even really think about it at this point. Way to fuck up, Aron. Now Quinton is going to move on to a way hotter dude that probably won’t make him play rock, paper, scissors to determine what position to take in sex. Sure, I think that’s a loss because, come on, that’s pretty damn funny. I imagine Quinton will see it as a win though because he’s a loser like that.

“I’m still meeting up with Molly today, though. We have a few things to discuss concerning Rodger Zinel.” I push my breakfast aside, throwing my parents both a smile. “Things will be less hectic once this new Green Bill is done and over with it, well, as long as it passes.”

“I’m sure it will. Rodger’s on the fence right now, but I’m pretty confident you’ll get his vote. Still, Molly may be able to set up an interaction.” Dad rolls his eyes. “They’re not meant to vote based on whether they like you, though that is never really the case, is it?”

“Nope.” I tap my fingers against the table. “Have... have either of you heard from Quinton?”

Mom hums. “We talked when he was here for your birthday.”

She’s lying. Mom always messaged Quinton daily, at least to tell him good morning, good night, and I love you. There’s no doubt in my mind that she’s still keeping in daily contact with him, especially since he still needs a security detail. He’ll be moving soon too once he graduates and has to move near Northview…

Damn, how did I forget about that? He’ll be moving. What if we don’t make up by then? It’s not like I can take a three-hour drive to visit him without looking totally suspicious. I can use the “we’re friends” excuse, but Quinton will know better. I know better. Damn it.

“Has he said anything about apartments?” I ask.

“He’s been looking at a few. Of course, Andy will have to make sure the security is up to par. Why don’t you call and talk to Quinton about it?”

“Well, I know where my insanity comes from now.”

Mom snorts. “There’s nothing wrong with checking in.”

“I think most people going through a breakup would argue against that.”

I’m surprised how quickly both my parents frown upon hearing that. It’s a little messed up to think I’m relieved that they’re as bummed about this outcome as I am.

“We’re in a bit of a different situation,” Mom argues quickly. “Right now, the public still believes that you’re together and even if you remain broken

up, the public knows Quinton. Who knows how long he'll need security, maybe even the rest of his life?"

"So you're saying that, no matter what happens, I've fucked up his life?" I stab my scrambled eggs violently enough to scrape the plate with my fork.

Dad winces. "That's not true, Aron."

"Sounds like it to me." I stand with a heavy sigh. If either of them had more to say, I cut them off. "I'll text him and see if he wants to talk about it." I pull out my phone to check the time. "I need to start getting ready. I'm meeting up with Molly at eleven."

"It's only eight o'clock," Mom argues, but I'm already walking out the doors to head upstairs.

I've been getting a lot of headaches lately. Is this what it feels like to get old? I swing my head around as if expecting Mom to appear, having somehow heard my internal thoughts and came to scream at me for daring to think that 22 is old. Seems I'm safe because she doesn't magically teleport to my side. Still, this sucks. I thought our twenties were supposed to be good? Isn't that when we're meant to discover our true selves and actually start becoming adults? If this is what adulthood is, it sucks and I would like to return it.

Once back in my room, I send Quinton a text. I try to keep it as professional as possible and remind myself to constantly think before I act. We don't need another "love you" fiasco.

Aron: Mom said you're looking at some apartments. If you need anything, let me know.

I toss my phone aside, expecting a long wait, but it lights up almost instantly. Heart, listen, you can't be skipping that fast. You're setting us up for failure, though I still grab my phone to check his response.

Quinton: Okay.

See? Set up for failure.

No use crying over spilled milk though, right? At least not now. I'll cry about it later tonight, probably. I've been doing that a lot more too, crying. Guess getting old also means getting emotional. I can see that. Mom cries before anything even happens in a movie and Dad sniffles anytime he sees a cute animal video.

I take my time in getting ready then leave to meet up with Molly. She's already at the designated meet up spot, a nice restaurant that my mind reminds me has been a previous date location for Quinton and me. Great, now I feel like crying again, but spotting Molly smiling at the table has me putting a stop to the waterworks. Again, they'll be back later.

"Good afternoon, Your Highness," Molly says, bowing politely.

I wave her off quickly. "Please, I told you to call me Aron."

She smiles and doesn't sit until after I have. It doesn't take long to order, seeing as we both seem to know what we want. I'm surprised to discover that we order the same thing too, both meal and drink wise.

"Funny," Molly giggles. "What are the chances we pick the same meal?"

I smile. "Great minds think alike, or eat alike, I guess."

"I know we're here on business, and pardon me if this upsets you, but are you feeling alright?" Molly asks so suddenly that I can't respond. My mouth hangs open like an idiot long enough for Molly to speak again. "You've been very busy lately. You look exhausted. If you'd like to reschedule—"

"No, no." I shake my hands quickly. "Sorry, I haven't been sleeping well lately. Been stressed out with school and the upcoming vote. Once this is all over and done with, I'll feel much better, I'm sure."

“Oh, you will.” Molly nods and I know she’s speaking from experience. “Usually the first few weeks before a proposal, although it’s my father giving it and not me. I’m tossing and turning in bed. Even if everything goes well, I’m on edge until the vote.” Molly pats her chest, right over her heart as if she’s feeling the panic now. She may yet be. “Actually, this may not be best to say before a meal, but I’ve gotten sick quite a few times before watching one of my father’s speeches.”

“Really?” I ask, thinking back on all the times I felt the same, and all the times I was the one getting sick before giving my speech. “You seem like such a confident speaker, though.”

“Once I’m up there, I feel much better, but before and after are a completely different story. I started taking anxiety medication just a few years ago. It helps, but sometimes are much worse than others.”

“I understand completely.” My hands twist the napkins as I speak with my gaze directed to the floor. “I feel like I’m on top of the world when I’m actually at the podium. I’m calm for a moment, however, before and after I can’t help but beat myself up about it. I’ll watch myself back and pinpoint every little mistake and belittle myself for it. You’d think after going speaking publicly so many times I’d learn not to pester myself about it, but it never really changes.”

Molly grabs my hand, which I now realize has stopped twisting the napkin only to grip so tight that my nail breaks the skin of my palm. Molly gently strokes the back of my hand with a friendly, but also sad, smile. She doesn’t let go even after I relax, choosing to hold on to me when she says, “I totally understand. Should you ever need someone to talk to, I’m here, but I also suggest talking to a professional. My medication really helps, and it sounds like you may want to look into it too.” She pats my hand once

more before retreating. “And, should you seek help, that’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I suddenly feel like I’m already at a therapy session.” I laugh, nervously sitting back.

I didn’t mean to open up so easily, but it’s easy to talk to Molly. She’s like me, high political standing with a lot of pressure from the public and her own standards that she’s been raised on. While I know my parents never mean to pressure me, they want my happiness, they can’t protect me from everything. I am meant to be king and Molly is meant to follow in her father’s footsteps, becoming a member of the royal council. Surely she’s interested. She at least seems to be as she is very knowledgeable about politics, but there is a lingering question of, if there was no pressure on her, would she have turned out the same?

Unlikely. It’s the butterfly effect, after all, one little difference will change the course of everything. I’m probably the same. I am this way because of a combination of things from childhood to now. Molly is the same. We’re the same and—Quinton isn’t.

Now that thought really hits like a ton of bricks. It’s an issue that has been brought up before, that Quinton brought up himself years ago. I’m understanding all those cliche romance novels where the leads don’t get together because of shit like this. Quinton feels a thousand miles away simply because he wasn’t born into a noble household. However, looking at Molly, smiling at me from across the table, I somehow feel more at ease, in an odd way.

At ease in the sense that, if we walked out hand in hand, no one would even question it. Hell, if Molly were male, we’d still get less shit. Because of who Quinton is, not only a commoner but also the son of a killer, there’s

even more heat. Heat that neither of us want. With someone like Molly, everything would be much easier. And Quinton wouldn't have to put up with as much as he does. He could be with someone that can give him the life he wants, that could let him be the antisocial asshole that he was put on this earth to be. Seriously, pretty sure it's his job to always be a piece of shit, but with me, that can't happen. He has to go to events and put on a smile and a show, even if he half-assed most of it.

The truth is, maybe Quinton and I really aren't meant for each other, and that has nothing to do with a lack of love, but everything to do with what we want vs what we need.

Since the world hates me, there are visitors when Molly and I exit the restaurant after our talk. I spot the paparazzi outside the windows. Molly puts on a pair of sunglasses at the door, also donning on a kind yet somehow cruel smile the moment said doors open. We're walking out together, our guards around us, keeping the cameras at bay. I'm used to the flashes and the questions, but today some stop me in my tracks.

"Your Highness, is it true that you and Mr. Barley have broken up?"

"Does this rendezvous with Ms. Deshante have to do with your recent break up with Mr. Barley?"

"Are you and Ms. Deshante seeing each other?"

"His Highness and I met to discuss political matters," Molly interjects quickly. She removes her sunglasses to show a stern glare, pinpointed at the paparazzi that refuse to back down. They continue to bombard us with questions.

"This was not a date, then?"

"No, as Ms. Deshante said, we were discussing political matters," I respond, gently pressing Molly forward. Our guards follow us, but so do the

cameras.

“Your Highness, it’s been some time since you’ve been seen in public with Mr. Barley. What do you have to say about that?”

“We’ve both been very busy lately,” I try not to growl.

“So it seems. Mr. Barley has been spotted with another man quite often these days. They were even spotted looking at apartments near Northview University. Were you aware?”

I bite the inside of my cheek to contain my slight shock and annoyance. Quinton checking out apartments, yes, I was aware. However, I didn’t know that Mystery Man went with him. Still, I give my best smile when answering, “Yes, I am aware, and last I checked, there’s nothing wrong with friends spending time together. I’m glad that he has company while I’m away.”

Even if that is total bullshit. I’d like it if Mystery Man was chucked off a cliff.

Thankfully, that’s the end of the abuse. We’ve made it to the cars where I say goodbye to Molly. She gives me an apologetic smile, then she’s gone. The moment I’m safely in the car, I let out a deep sigh. Jeremy raises a brow when asking, “Are you alright, Your Highness?”

“I’m annoyed.”

“Understandable.”

“Why must they always be up my ass about Quinton? And why can’t I spend time with someone without there being rumors?”

“Well, Ms. Deshante is technically of noble status so,” Jeremy clears his throat, probably realizing that I didn’t want an honest answer, nor did he probably even mean to give one. He averts his gaze when correcting

himself. “It is indeed annoying that they don’t give either of you a moment of peace.”

I throw my head back on the seat. “You’re right though.”

“About?”

“Molly. We’re similar, more similar than me and Quinton.”

Jeremy doesn’t respond to that. He gives a sympathetic gaze through the rearview mirror before I request to be left alone. The tinted window rolls up and I get exactly what I want. The only sound comes from the car engine. For once, even my thoughts are quiet, yet even quiet thoughts aren’t all that welcoming. Not thinking anything means I’m feeling everything and right now I wish I wasn’t feeling anything at all. Time and time again, I’m being reminded of how Quinton and I really…

We’re really not meant to be, are we?

It was easier in school. We woke up, went to class, annoyed the hell out of each other, spent time together, did our homework (I attempted mine anyway) and went to bed (or did something that had to do with beds.) School wasn’t amazing, but it certainly felt a hell of a lot easier. There weren’t as many expectations on me, from myself and everyone else. Not to mention we were cut off by the public. Paparazzi weren’t allowed on campus. After about a month or so of our open relationship, kids didn’t take pictures or videos anymore, either. Life was quiet and simple. Now it isn’t.

Now I can easily get on any social media, search our names, and find our lives for the world to see. As the paparazzi pointed to earlier, Quinton has been searching for apartments with Mystery Man. I once again spot a few pictures as well as just some users claiming to have been shocked when seeing Quinton. He is, technically, a celebrity, so there have been some moments where someone has asked for a picture, a handshake, a hug etc.

Security doesn’t allow that, but it was always funny to hear Quinton talk about it.

I search through the pictures, and the theories even when I know I shouldn’t be. The sinking feeling in my gut only grows worse. And the more I’m agreeing with myself; Quinton and I are too different. We aren’t meant to be. We won’t work out. We’ve been lying to ourselves this whole time that we would.

He deserves so much more than me. He deserves a life better suited for him, one where he can be who he wants when he wants, where he doesn’t have to constantly look over his shoulder, or care about what he says or wears. He can have that and maybe he secretly wants that, but even when telling myself this, there’s still jealousy.

Anytime I see that stupid guy in a picture, my teeth grind. I’m surprised my phone hasn’t caught fire by how hard I’m glaring at it. But when I see a picture of Quinton smiling, where he appears comfortable and relaxed, I calm down. Calm down enough to think that maybe we should talk. Maybe we need to talk because maybe this really is the end. And maybe we have to accept that.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Quinton

I’ve always been orderly. Dirty laundry is always in the hamper. Clothes are folded neatly in the drawers or hung properly in the closet. There are no wrinkles in my clothes. The bed is always made. The dishes are done. The kitchen is clean. My desk is organized. Everything is where it should be.

But now the dirty laundry scatters the floor. Wrinkled clothes are strewn about without care. The bed is never made. The dishes have stacked. The kitchen is dirty. My desk could rival a jungle. One may lose themselves if they attempt to discover anything. And I’m not up to cleaning any of it.

My phone keeps ringing, but I don’t answer. I don’t check the caller either, mostly because I worry who it may be and if I have the willpower to ignore him. The room is dark. The bed is cold. I’m tired, yet my eyes refuse to close. The curtains are drawn. The sun peeks in through the cracks. My apartment door opens and I know who it is long before they speak.

“Quinton, are you seriously still asleep?” Autumn asks. She pretends to be annoyed, but she has always been shit at pretending. There’s clear concern in her voice, more so when she opens my bedroom door to find me still in bed.

“Get your lazy ass up,” she orders, scanning the room that is not as it should be. She picks up clothes, mumbling to herself. In the back of my mind, I feel bad, but that doesn’t make me move. “It’s Saturday so we’re going out,” she adds, tossing the clothes into a hamper.

“Hn.” I turn over. She rips the covers off, but if she honestly thinks that’ll get me to move, then she’s about to be very disappointed. Her huff that follows once amused me. Now I don’t really want to hear it.

The bed dips, signaling that she’s sat down. Her hand rests on my shoulder. The touch should be comforting, but I have found nothing comforting lately. How ridiculous to be so hung up on the path I chose to take. How ridiculous, still not being sure if it was the right path to take.

“Quinny.” She sighs.

There’s sorrow in her voice, and I hate it. I hate even more that it’s there because of me, but there isn’t much I can do. I’ve never been the type to act a fool. That is Aron’s department. Thinking about him only worsens my mood. Thinking of him is dangerous. I want to call him. I want to hear his voice.

What is he doing right now? Should I go see him?

No. I can’t, rather I shouldn’t, but it seems that logic is no longer mine. Once I listened to logic so easily. Now my heart is constantly trying to take control. I fear what will happen if it does.

“You can’t spend most of your time locked in your room,” Autumn says. She throws herself on me. I grunt in response, meeting her concerned gaze.

I try to push her off, but she wraps her arms around me and holds me in place. Perhaps that is a good thing. I need someone to hold me in place, otherwise I don't know where I will go.

"I don't spend the majority of my time locked in my room," I argue.

"Right. Shall we recap what you've been doing the last few weeks?"

"No."

"Let's see, you get up, go to class, then come home to—oh that's right—lock yourself in your room."

I roll my eyes. She's being dramatic. Why are there so many dramatic people in my life? Ah, I suppose now there's one less drama queen. A thought that's as painful as the day I left that drama queen.

I gently push Autumn away. She falls back onto the bed, sitting crossed leg as I sit up. I don't need to see her to know she's frowning when I say, "I was unaware that it is wrong to complete my homework while at home. From now on, I'll go to the library, but did you forget that I have been going out?"

"Searching for an apartment once or twice does not count as going out when you've been stuck at home for six weeks."

"Not all of us enjoy constant company."

"I'm not saying you need constant company, but I don't want you being alone all the time, especially not now."

"I'm fine, Autumn." We all know that to be a lie. I'm almost tempted to laugh at myself.

"Right. Have you seen your apartment? It's a disaster."

"I've been busy."

"You've been busy before, but still cleaned." She's up to clean the room again. I don't see why. It'll be dirty again soon. I haven't had the energy to

clean and, honestly, there's too much here to remind me of Aron. A shirt he bought me, his laughter when watching a movie on the couch, or some silly conversation over dinner. How long does it take for memories to fade? How long will it take for me to forget or at least not care anymore?

"When was the last time you talked to Aron?" she asks. My fingers twitch and ears burn when hearing his name.

"This morning. Cora told him I was looking for apartments."

"Yeah, so what'd you two talk about after that?"

"Nothing." I glance at Autumn over my shoulder to find her pursing her lips.

"So you didn't talk to him. He sent a text, didn't he?"

I nod.

Autumn groans. "I meant when did you last actually hear from him?"

"His birthday."

"And you don't want to... change that?" She's trying to beat around the bush. She's failing.

"You agreed we should take a break, that maybe this is it."

"I know, but," Autumn suddenly sniffles. I try not to look at her, but she sniffles again. That finally gets me to my feet.

"I hate seeing you both like this," she cries when burying her face in my chest. I rest my chin atop her head, feeling her tremble in my arms. "I know how tough things were for you," she whispers, arms wrapped tight around me. "I know how tough it is for Aron, too. I know you did what you thought was best for you. I honestly can't say I know what's best for either of you. I just want you to be happy."

"I know."

"You know, you can cry if you need to, Quinton."

“I don’t.”

“Are you sure?” Autumn peers up at me. When she does, her bottom lip trembles terribly, then her face scrunches up. The tears come in droves.

I snort. “What an ugly face you’re making.”

“You’re one to talk.” She points to my eyes.

I raise a brow, reaching up to rub beneath my eyes. Huh? It’s wet. I’m crying, but Autumn says nothing. She just pulls me in for a hug and I realize it was never her that was trembling, but me. Crying is a rather foreign action to me. I’ve always excelled at holding back my emotions, calming down in moments of need, but now the tears won’t stop. Just like they wouldn’t stop on New Years until my eyes were so dry that they were sore. Since then, I haven’t cried again. I suppose that’s why I can’t stop now.

Autumn is here, though. She helps me clean up the apartment. I would rather clean than acknowledge the tears. A distraction is needed, and this place is a mess. It takes a while, almost the whole day, to return the apartment to what it once was. By now, the tears have stopped, but my eyes are sore again.

“So, has Andy gotten back to you about the apartments?” Autumn asks after ordering a late dinner for us. We’re on the couch. The TV is on but the sound is low. I’m not sure what show it is, but the lead actor has blonde hair and blue eyes. I swiftly shut the TV off.

“Mm. There are two that will work.” I pull out my phone to show Autumn the listings. Both are single bedrooms within walking distance of campus. The likelihood of walking is slim, but I would rather be close. I will be spending most of my time at the lab.

“These are nice. You’ve already viewed them, right? I never trust the pictures.”

“Yes, I went with Dom.”

Autumn purses her lips, which has me asking, “What?”

“What, what?” She asks.

“You’re making a stupid face.”

“No reason.” She hands the phone back to me, but I see through her. I simply wait for her to call herself out on her bullshit, which she inevitably does after a few minutes of my silent staring. “I was just hoping you’d say no and I could suggest, oh, you should go look at them with Aron.”

“Is that really appropriate?”

“You agreed to be friends now, right? And Dom is a friend that you went to view the apartments with, so yes, it is appropriate.” She says that yet frowns immediately afterwards. I can take a guess why. She’s as uncertain about Aron as I am. At least I know I’m not being a total fool.

She averts her gaze when asking, “I know you said maybe things could be fixed, but do you want them to, Quinton?”

Autumn must think I don’t answer because I don’t understand, but that isn’t the case. I’m not answering because I’m scared of the answer. I’m scared of not knowing and scared of eventually knowing. Feelings are complicated. I hate them.

“Do you want to get back together with Aron?” She asks again.

I have an answer, one that my heart screams back at me, but then I remember the disappointment. I recall all the excuses I made when Aron would cancel. I’d act calm and collected. I’d tell him it was ok. I’d sit at home waiting for him while wondering how much of my life will be just that; waiting. I didn’t want that. I still don’t want it. That’s why I ended it.

“I don’t know,” I finally answered while messing around on my phone. I’m not really paying attention, but I rather keep my eyes fixated on

anything other than Autumn. “Sometimes I want what once was, sometimes I know that the bad was outweighing the good.” I shake my head when repeating, “I don’t know.”

“I told Aron that he needs to consider what he wants from you.”

I raise a brow at that.

“And I told him you both need to consider what you want and what you need,” she adds, looking away as if ashamed. “I want you guys back together, but that’s because I saw how happy you were before. We’re all clinging to that, but it’s true that you need to consider what sort of life you want in the future. Can Aron give you that?”

“Yes.”

Autumn’s eyes widen, as do my own.

A moment ago, was I not questioning myself? And yet when Autumn throws the question out like that, I have an immediate response. Isn’t that because no matter what future I envision, there’s only one variable that remains the same?

Aron. It’s always Aron. Whether I continue on with school, he’s there. Whether I remain at the castle, he’s there. Whether we’re old or young or married or have kids, everything can change and I won’t be disappointed or unhappy so long as he’s there. And yet I’m the one that broke it off. Maybe that’s because I know that I’ll let everyone drag me through the mud, that I’ll continue to make excuses for him, that I’ll become less of me in order to be with him. That isn’t what a relationship is meant to be like. Even I, the so-called demonic spawn without a single romantic bone in his body, knows that.

I throw my head in my hands. Nothing can stop this headache, but I get myself some medicine, anyway. Autumn waits on the couch for my return.

She gives me a sympathetic smile.

“I think you’re hopeless, Quinton,” she teases, but it’s true.

I am hopeless. So hopeless that even after all this, even after our time apart, there’s clear jealousy burning in my gut upon reading the heading of an article. This is why I steer clear of social media, but it’s impossible to avoid everything, especially now. Without Aron, I need distractions, so I find myself on my phone more and now I regret it.

Is There Trouble Brewing in the Royal Household? Prince Aron Vaughn Caught on a Date with Molly Deshante!

Beneath the headline is a picture of Aron sitting with a young woman with dark hair, Molly, I guess, in a restaurant. One we went to from time to time for dates. My hands shake. She’s laughing. Aron’s smiling. He looks happy. They look happy. Molly, was it? The one Aron canceled our plans for.

“Quinton?” Autumn calls. I turn off my phone screen before she notices. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” I set my phone aside. My eyes glance to the bedroom, through the open door at the desk barely visible from the living room. In the drawer, there’s a small black box that I’ve yet to get rid of. Although I don’t see it, I know it’s there as if it’s taunting me, just like how Molly Deshante is taunting me, how Aron is taunting me, how the public is taunting us.

I hate it.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I lie.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Aron

Aron: We need to talk.

We need to talk texts are the worst. I never thought I'd feel that as the one sending it. It took all my willpower to pick up my phone and nearly ten minutes of mind numbing contemplation to finally send it. It takes Quinton about five minutes to respond.

Quinton: About?

Aron: Us. Are you busy tonight?

Quinton: Yes.

Aron: Tomorrow then? I swear it's important.

Quinton: Tomorrow. I'll be home around 5.

Aron: Ok, see you at 5.

Damn, I'm the one asking to talk and I'm the one dreading it. What the hell am I doing? The right thing, based on whose opinion? Mine? Both of ours? My head hurts. I need a nap although I've just got up. Ain't that a

mood! But I am no longer a kindergartener that can take naps in the middle of the day, how unfortunate. Life was simpler then. I would like to hire someone to create a time machine and take me back and keep me there. Give me back the days of napping and eating junk food into the late hours of the night.

Or give me back the high school years spent with Quinton, seeing as, if tonight goes as I expect, there won't be anymore years with Quinton. Not even as friends. Ouch, is that my heart shattering into a bajillion pieces? Why yes, yes it is.

Tomorrow arrives in the blink of an eye. Seems the universe wishes me to be tormented as soon as possible thus I head to Quinton's apartment a little before five. My phone rests in my shaking grasp. The screen is on, showing off my smiling face alongside Quinton's. The time flashes 4:57pm and I count the seconds until we arrive.

How fucked up is it I'm hoping for a horrendous car crash? Something like in the movies where the lead is badly injured and their lover comes running to their bedside. Somehow they forget all their woes and fall back into a hopeless romance because you never know what may happen in life so you should love while you still can!

Unfortunately, no one gets into an accident with me today, though I can't blame them. We made it to Quinton's in record time. Ah, I forgot to text him to let him know I'm on my way. Whatever. I'm already here, so it's too late now.

When at the door, I hesitate. My hands are glued to my side. I believe this is called frozen in fear, fear of what I'm about to do and what it may cause in the future. I'm second guessing myself again. Way to go, Aron! Can't

you make up your damn mind? Can't I take the right path for once, even if it's the one I absolutely hate?

This is for Quinton, though. I'm doing this for Quinton. He has done so much for me, and what have I given in return? Well, I let him have a smoking hot boyfriend for almost five years. One should be proud of having dated me. I'm a total stud! But, admittedly, that's about it. I've taken away his future. I've added misery to his life. The bad far outweighs the good, so I have to do this even if I doubt I'll ever get over him.

Ok. Deep breaths, Aron. Deep breaths. Now all you need to do is raise your fist and knock on the door. Go on. Knock. It's very easy. Why am I shaking? Stop. This is fine. I'm totally fine. I am…

I am not fine at all.

But I knocked on the door. A few moments pass before it swings open. Why the hell is this demon so good looking, even when he's clearly tired? Quinton's hair is messy. His t-shirt is wrinkled and eyes squinting with obvious exhaustion. There are dark bags staining his skin that have grown a little paler since the last time I saw him.

Perhaps Quinton forgot about my arrival this time because he seems genuinely shocked to see me. We stand in silence for a moment, not that I'm complaining. I'm enjoying the view, seeing him and those warm brown eyes that I once described as demonic. Ok, they're still demonic. He could still freeze the arctic, which I don't get why he hasn't yet. Global warming is a terrible thing. Greta Thunberg would appreciate your participation in the fight, Quinton! Anyway, my point is, yes, he's still demonic, but they're as beautiful as they are evil, which I will never say out loud.

"Come in," Quinton says, stepping aside. "I didn't realize it was so late."

"Sorry, I forgot to text."

Quinton hums. I'm kicking my shoes off at the door, watching him move into the living room, but my body freezes once more upon seeing someone else here. Mystery Man, sitting at the table that's covered in papers and books with their laptops open. Mystery Man offers a smile that I wish I was mature enough to return. We all know that mature ain't how I roll. Is the window open behind him? I wanna push him out of it. Yes, yes, because murder solves all our problems. Mhm. I'm totally mentally sound.

"Good evening, Your Highness," Mystery Man says with a polite bow. His voice is more high pitched than I expected. It's annoying—claims the boy with an equally high-pitched voice, but we need not discuss.

"Did I interrupt something?" I ask, uncaring if it's hissed between my clenched teeth.

"We were working on some assignments," Mystery Man replies for Quinton, who is back at the table. He rolls his shoulders and sways his neck from side to side. I hear it crack from here.

"But we can finish them later. Neither of us were watching the time. I'm sorry," he continues in an animated rush.

"We're almost done," Quinton says. He's already typing away, leaving me shocked in the entryway. "This is Dom, by the way." He sends a half-assed wave in Dom's direction. The name sounds familiar, I've heard it before but I can't place it.

"Aron can wait a few minutes," Quinton adds.

Dom snorts until I glare at him. He looks away quickly while I grumble my way over to the table. Quinton raises a brow when I take a seat next to him, making sure my chair is closer than Dom's. I lean over a bit too, definitely bursting Quinton's personal bubble. He clears his throat, but I am ignoring him. I am busy glaring at Dom. He hasn't noticed this glare yet

since he’s working, but when he does, I will make him piss his pants in fear!

Hold up. Wait a second. I didn’t come here to get jealous over Quinton’s friend. Damn, I need to pull myself together.

There is no pulling myself together. Dom annoys me. Has he even talked to me since I got here? No, but maybe that is what annoys me. His face annoys me and his... breathing annoys me. Yeah, it’s too loud. And when he glances up at me, I don’t like the way he looks. There’s something about him that puts me on edge—the fact that he’s close to Quinton, that’s the something.

“What are you working on?” I ask, peering at Quinton’s laptop.

“You’re too close,” Quinton whispers, making me realize that I’m practically resting my head on his shoulder. Our eyes meet. He’s warm. I swear I fit perfectly against him, and him against me. I want to kiss him. I wonder if he feels any different. I wonder if he’s thinking the same. Probably not, the heartless bastard.

Quinton shoves me away with his shoulder. I curse in response, rubbing my slightly red cheek.

“What the hell was that for, jackass?” I growl.

“Personal space.”

“Your personal space is the size of Texas.”

“You know that yet never take it into consideration.”

“Fuck consideration. I’ll get close to you if I want. What are you, the prince?!” I grin at my joke until Dom chuckles. He gets another glare, one that intensifies when I catch him watching Quinton with a soft smile.

When Dom looks at me, he flinches, then averts his gaze as if ashamed, clears his throat and returns to work. I don’t know if I should take that as a

sign that he likes Quinton or if I’m being jealous and thus assuming that he does—wait, I’m not jealous. This isn’t jealousy. I’m merely concerned as Quinton’s...ex and current friend. I want to make sure Quinton meets the right…

I bite the inside of my cheek. I don’t even want to think about that, even when I’m here to ensure that this is our end. Can I really go through with that? What am I doing?

“Don’t try to joke. Your brain will explode,” Quinton continues.

“Shut your face. I’m hilarious,” I argue immediately. The words flow easily. I don’t have to think or act or pretend. With Quinton, it’s easy. Everything is easy again.

He rolls his eyes. “By whose account? Yours?”

“Everyone’s!”

“Everyone being?”

“Everyone being everyone, and you call me a dumbass.”

“You definitely are one if you honestly find yourself funny.”

“You definitely are one if you honestly find yourself funny,” I mock, earning another eye roll.

“Childish.”

I grin when repeating the mockery, “Childish.”

“Aron.”

“Quinny.”

Another soft chuckle from Dom. The both of us glance at him, although only one of us is glaring and, oh boy, it ain’t Quinton this time. The world really is ending!

“If he’s too loud, I can kick him out,” Quinton suggests. I gape at him for it, whereas Dom quickly shakes his head.

“It’s fine. You’re pretty funny to watch,” he responds, swiftly returning to his work.

Quinton faces me. He’s quiet, which has me tilting my head to the side curiously. Does he have something to say? Is he going to try and kick me out? If so, he’ll have to drag me. I will cling to whatever surface I can to stay here. To stay this close for another second longer. He’s warm and I feel lighter merely being here. The stress has washed away, as if I’m forgetting about everything that’s outside these walls.

But Quinton says nothing. He returns to his work. The two of them speak of matters I don’t understand. They’re looking over a few papers for another thirty minutes until Quinton shuts his laptop. Dom does the same, stretching his arms high above his head while Quinton pinches the bridge of his nose. Instinct kicks in. I’m heading for the bathroom to get some medicine, then the kitchen for a glass of water. Both Dom and Quinton stare at me with wide eyes when I appear with both in hand, holding them out for Quinton.

“Ah, do you want some medicine too, Dom?” I ask, because that’s the only reason I can think of why I’m getting these stares. Dom swiftly shakes his head.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you, Your Highness!” He stands and starts cleaning up his workspace. “And thank you for letting us finish up.”

“Not like Quinny would have let me stop him from working.” I’m not sure why I keep saying Quinny, but I am. It has Quinton glaring at me and, dare I say it, Dom stiffens at the nickname. I like it. Yes, be more nervous and get the fuck out! Go, shoo!

Quinton hesitantly takes the offered help from me. He chugs the water and, to my great displeasure, escorts Dom to the door. The boy gives me

another bow goodbye that I attempt to smile at, but perhaps I've been around Quinton too much. The smile must be demonic because Dom actually goes wide-eyed and turns away fast. Heh. Excellent.

They're at the door for a while. Dom smiles brightly at Quinton like he doesn't have a care in the world. Then his cheeks turn a little pink. My hands clench at my side. Quinton has to notice, he's looking right at him, but they keep talking and Dom's cheeks darken. Finally, he says goodbye, leaving with the door shutting quietly behind him.

Maybe he should have stayed, if only to allow Quinton and I to joke like we don't have a care in the world. Now that he's gone, there are no distractions. Nothing to stop either of us from thinking of the text I sent. At least, I'm assuming that's what Quinton is thinking about when he faces me. He's wearing his typical apathetic facade, one that doesn't show even a crack when asking, "So, what did we need to talk about?"

"I don't know," I answer, crossing my arms with a pout. I don't mean to sound upset when I add, "Maybe we need to talk about Dom."

"Why?"

"You two seem close."

"Is that a problem?" Quinton crosses his own arms, but there's definitely no pout, only a scowl.

"I don't know, is it?"

Quinton sighs. "You said it was important."

"This is important."

"This is stupid." Quinton storms into the kitchen to grab himself another drink. I follow behind him, shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

"So... who is he, exactly?" I grumble.

"A friend."

“Says the one that never wants to admit to having friends.”

Quinton faces me, leaning against the counter. “I already told you about him.”

He did? I wrack my brain for that information, but I can’t find it. I admitted the name sounded familiar, but I didn’t think Quinton had already told me about him. Since I’m obviously at a loss, Quinton explains to me, “He’s the senior grad student from Northview that took me on a tour of the campus.”

Ah, so he’s from Northview—wait a minute!

“That’s three hours away. Why is he around so much if his school is that far away?” I ask, memories of the countless photographs spreading online flash through my mind. Is it true, trouble in paradise they said? Surely not, Quinton wouldn’t…

But we aren’t together. We’re broken up. If he wanted, he could. He has every right to.

“Why are you so hung up on him?” Quinton asks yet he still responds. “He’s working on a project with a local company, so he’s been staying in the capital the last few months.” Quinton gestures to the table. “And since he’s here, he’s been helping me finish up my projects. Is that an acceptable response?”

“Acceptable response.” I scoff. “I was just asking.”

“You don’t have the right to be so fixated on him when you aren’t any better.”

I raise a brow at that. What is he talking about?

Quinton sits his empty glass aside to move back into the living room. I don’t follow this time, merely watch as he cleans up the table.

“Molly Deshante,” he says. The name comes out as a cold hiss. “Looks like the two of you had a nice date.”

“It wasn’t a date. You, of all people, know not to believe the headlines.”

“Hn.”

“We were discussing Roger Zinel’s vote for the upcoming Green Bill. She has a lot of connections.”

“I’m aware. You canceled our plans to meet with those connections.”

Shit. This conversation is a ticking time bomb. One of us is going to explode and I’m shocked to admit that I honestly don’t know who. Quinton has always been good at containing his anger, but even I am noticing the tremor in his hands. I swear I can taste his desire to yell.

“I did, and I’m sorry. You know I am,” I mumble, scratching nervously at the back of my neck. This is going worse than I expected, not that I expected anything good. “Molly and I are just friends.”

“Dom and I are just friends.”

“Does he see it that way, though?” I want to slap myself the moment the question comes out of my mouth.

Quinton faces me with a knitted brow, easily throwing that question back at me, “Does Molly only see you as just friends?”

“You’ve never met her.”

“And you met Dom once.”

“He was blushing around you like crazy. And you, of all people, can’t possibly have not known. You call me out on it all the time!”

Quinton pinches the bridge of his nose again. I spot the vein throbbing in his temple. “This is pointless.” He heads for his bedroom. “You don’t have the right to care about Dom, nor do I have the right to care about you with Molly. Move on, if you want.”

“Move on?!” I scream, the anger boiling over to cancel out logic or reason. With me, that is never surprising, yet Quinton still freezes at the outburst. He barely has time to face me before I’m across the room, gripping him by the collar of his shirt. “Don’t accuse me of moving on because I haven’t, not for a second! Even when—even when I’ve been considering that this should be our end, that doesn’t mean I can just move on from you like nothing, Quinton!”

“Our end?” Quinton asks, somehow clinging to the one part I didn’t mean to let slip. His expression turns cold, but it’s only to hide the truth from me. “So, this is what you wanted to talk about?”

“I…”

Quinton brushes my hand aside. The snort that follows is laced with sorrow, so is his face when he whispers, “To think today would be the day that you actually show up on time.”

“Quinton, I…” I what? I’m sorry? I didn’t mean it? I’m an idiot and a fool and I want to take this all back, but I can’t. There’s nothing to change this moment that will be forever seared into my memory.

I can’t look at Quinton when I will myself to say what I truly came here to say. “I want things to be different. I want us to go back to the way we were, joking, smiling, laughing, jokingly arguing over every damn thing. I want that more than anything. You know I do!”

Quinton’s gaze is on me. I can feel it. How he faces me while I say this is beyond me. I can barely stand being in his presence.

“But all those years ago, you were right, we’re from different worlds. I’m the heir to the throne and we both know that I honestly want that, even with the troubles involved. What we both want in our future is clashing, though. Maybe you were right to break things off, and maybe I was stupid to even

think we could fix it. Maybe... we need to accept that it's really over." A hiccup passes through my lips, one that I cover with the back of my hand. I take a deep breath to steady my breathing. It doesn't help. "I want you to be happy. I want you to have the life that you deserve. I'm jealous of people like Dom and what they can give you; the life that you've always wanted. I can't give that to you, even if I desperately want to. I'm so sorry, Quinton."

Silence. Complete and utter silence that gnaws away at me until I'm forced to raise my gaze. What I'm met with leaves me stumped. Quinton's painful expression causes something in my mind to snap. There are no thoughts, only regret for what I've said, even if I told myself countless times to go through with it. Quinton's eyes speak more than words ever could. Dare I say it, he looks disappointed.

He sounds it too when he whispers, "The life I've always wanted, this sounds familiar."

Because it is. I worried over it before and it seems I'm a dumbass because my words have once again bothered Quinton to the extent that he's willing to visibly show it.

"Why are you the one to decide what I want? Why are you deciding what I should want?" He asks, stepping away from me with a shake of his head. "But maybe you're right, maybe it's a good thing I didn't ask." He points to the door. "Leave."

"Quinton."

"I'm afraid we can't be friends anymore, either." Quinton steps into his bedroom. He doesn't face me when he says, "It's clear the same problem remains, so I guess we really can't be fixed."

He slams the door.

I’ve been shut out again. I need to follow. I need to run after him. I need to poke and prod and insist we talk, like I used to always do. The boy that once followed Quinton without care, that always went above and beyond. I need him back now more than ever.

Where did Aron go?

Where did I go?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Is this royal break up so surprising?" April Mayes asks on the morning news. Beside her are her co-hosts, Kristi and Shawn. April flips her hair over her shoulder with an elegant wave while continuing, "With all the pressure from the public, paparazzi constantly on their tail and, let's face it, the disbelief and fear of having someone like Quinton Barley anywhere near the throne, it was bound to happen."

"Quinton Underwood," Kristi corrects, earning a curled upper lip from April.

Thatta girl, Kristi! I knew I liked you for a reason.

I take another bite of pizza; the box laying open on my bare stomach. There's crumbs all over the bed, but I don't care. I likely look like shit since I haven't bathed in three days. I imagine I smell like shit too, but when you are contained in your own filth, the smell doesn't really get to you.

This has become a fairly recent occurrence over the month, but this week has been especially bad because, ding-ding-ding, it's April. Today would have been mine and Quinton's five-year anniversary.

Eh, sadness, listen, let's not be friends. Why don't you leave for a few days? Gimme a break. Cut me some slack. No? Ok. I'm just going to shove an entire pizza slice in my mouth. Unfortunately, it does not choke me, but I'm about to add another in an attempt to try. Kristi's following words have me pausing and nodding eagerly along with her.

"And, yes, the breakup is surprising! Aron and Quinton have been together since high school. Today would have been their five-year anniversary. He lived in the royal household and has still been seen spending time with the king and queen. There doesn't seem to be any lack of love. I still can't believe it's true." Kristi looks to Shawn for agreement, but he's always been the man in the middle, literally.

"I admit I'm surprised, but considering the amount of pressure on the both of them, and Quinton attending grad school soon, it makes sense," Shawn says, giving Kristi an apologetic smile. "I am curious if the king or queen plans to hold a press conference to announce the break up officially. The most we got was confirmation from their representatives after all the ongoing gossip."

Kristi sighs. "If they do, I doubt it will be anytime soon. I imagine the prince is distraught."

"Distraught and worried. Suppose there was cheating?" April asks, earning a glare from Kristi while Shawn averts his gaze nervously. April shrugs as if it isn't a problem to ask, which it totally is, you freaking dumb gossiper! Fuck you! There was no cheating. I'd throw this pizza at you, but it'd be a waste and an insult to all the great pizza everywhere.

“What? Have seen everything online?!” The screen changes behind April to show pictures of Quinton and Dom. There’s quite a few that I’ve already seen, going on back for months. Why hello another piece of pizza, please, help me eat away my feelings.

“Dominick Williams, he’s a grad student at Northview that has been seen with Quinton frequently leading up to this so-called abrupt break up,” April adds, both giving and sipping the tea. I am about to heat that tea up and toss it onto her stupid fucking face. “There’s been plenty of speculation that they’re more than friends.”

“Those are just rumors,” Kristi argues.

“It’s our job to look into rumors in hopes of finding fact!”

“But you’re presuming facts based on ru—” The TV shuts off.

“Hey!” I shout until I realize that it’s Mom standing in my room with the remote in hand. The opposite hand is perched on her hip as she stares down at my dirty ass. I smile sheepishly when she wrinkles her nose.

“Uh, morning, Mom.”

“I told you not to watch TV,” she says, trying her best to keep a calm voice, but I can hear the slight tremble in her tone. She has told me a million times to avoid social media, especially now that the cat is out of the bag. We figured there’s no use continuing to lie about me and Quinton still being together. After all, we haven’t talked since that day nearly two weeks ago. He has blocked my number and I’m too scared to see him.

Time to face reality. We’re over.

“It’s just some dumb morning talk show,” I mumble, going to take another bite of pizza until Mom steals the box. I whine while sitting up, crumbs tumbling all over the bed.

“You were so fixated on work before, but now you barely leave your room.” She huffs. “You eat junk food and drink pop all day while torturing yourself with this.” She waves the remote at the blank TV. “This absolute bullshit!”

I gape. “Mom, you said a curse word.”

“I can curse if I feel like it!”

“But you hit me when I curse?”

“I’m your mother. I do what I want!”

Wow, my personality really comes from genetics.

Mom puffs out her cheeks when sitting the box aside. She takes a spot on the bed, only after ordering me to wipe the crumbs off. What? My crumbs are too dirty for you?! Whatever, she’s next to me now, holding my hand, which makes no sense cause that hand touched the crumbs and is now touching you so you’re still dirty, ha!

“You know what today is, don’t you?” She asks. “Are you up for it?”

“Yeah.” I say that, but don’t really know for sure. Today is even more than a reminder of my end with Quinton, it’s also the final vote for the new Green Bill I’ve been working on for months. In the back of my mind, I wonder if I would have pushed today aside to spend time with Quinton. And, in the back of my mind, I know the truth; that I wouldn’t have, and it would have only made him feel worse.

Enough about that. This is my first big piece of legislation that will show just how much support I do or don’t have in the court. I’m going to have to give a speech if it passes and face the backlash of the press if it doesn’t.

“Why don’t we just let your father handle it?” Mom asks, to which I shake my head.

“No way. I’ve worked on this for months. I want to be there if it all works out.”

Mom brushes a few stray strands of hair from my face. Her hand rests on my cheek, rubbing it with the back of her thumb. “I know, I know, but I’m so worried about you, Aron.”

“I’m fine, Mom.” I force on a smile even if I really don’t want to, but I want to reassure her. “I know I’ve been acting weird lately. I just need some more time. I’ll be back to normal soon, aren’t I always?”

Seems I can’t convince Mom, just like I can’t convince myself. Something’s missing and it’s more than Quinton, like a piece of me got lost. I don’t know when I lost it or how to find it again.

“If you feel unwell at all today—” she tries, only for me to interrupt her.

“I will be fine.” I take her hand from my cheek and place it in her lap. “Trust me.”

Mom purses her lips and gives a hesitant nod, but then she slaps me in the stomach. I yelp, cradling my abused tummy while glaring at her. “What the hell was that for?!”

She whacks me again.

“This is child abuse!”

“You stink. Get a bath,” she orders, pointing to the bathroom. “And I am not having the maids come in here to clean. You clean this pigsty up yourself.”

“But it’s their job to clean!”

Mom’s eyes narrow and glare with such intensity that she could give Quinton a run for his money. My legs shiver when she hisses through clenched teeth, “Aron Lee Vaughn, you are cleaning your own room.”

“I am definitely cleaning my room, oh lovely mother of mine.”

She does a complete 180 and beams with a bright intensity that could rival the sun. “Good, now go bathe!”

I run to the bathroom like the hounds of hell are on my heels. Mom might as well be. She’s vicious! So I bathe and tidy up my room. Ok, so one maid came in to help, but we agreed to keep it secret! Keep it secret, keep it safe, as Gandalf would say. Then there’s preparation for the day. I have to put on a fancy suit and get my hair done, which doesn’t help the aching sensation lingering in my gut. That’s been lingering and festering for weeks.

Our anniversary. Our time over spring break. Quinton’s first visit. Our confusion and worries about these feelings that we did not know would take us so far. It happened here, so no matter where I go, I’m reminded of him. I’m reminded of our official dating status, not coming from a request but a statement, and it makes me chuckle, remembering Quinton’s blunt words and my reaction. I remember his expression on his first plane ride and how he had his own room, yet we shared the bed for the entire visit.

I miss him. Damn it, I miss him so much it hurts. I once thought love in movies and stories was so far-fetched. How could someone love another so intensely? But now I get it. This pain I’m feeling, I do wonder when it will leave and if I can even deal with it.

I don’t have time to be acting so childishly. Stop it, Aron. Today is a big day. Focus, focus! Dad wouldn’t be like this. He’d stand tall. He’d talk proudly in front of the crowd. He’d handle himself, so I need to too. I need to be like him, otherwise today will only lead to disappointment. This needs to work. Something needs to work, for once.

“Your Highness.” Kingsley smiles from the doorway into the lounge. “It’s time to leave.”

“Thanks, Kingsley.” I get up, passing Kingsley, who continues to wear a warm smile.

“Good luck today, Your Highness. I’m sure everything will go well.”

“I hope so.” I wish I had that optimism, but I don’t.

I meet up with Dad and Andy downstairs. The moment our car leaves the gates, there're paparazzi following us. They snap pictures of our vehicles leaving, then follow us in their own cars to the courthouse in the center of the city. I’ve been here plenty of times, but never for anything this big. It has always been about Dad’s accomplishments (or defeats), but today is different. Today it’s about me and that’s obvious the moment I step out of the car.

“Your Highness, are you confident about today’s vote?”

“How do you feel about what John Coralline said this morning?”

“The public is worried today’s Green Bill won’t pass. What are your thoughts, Your Highness?”

“How are you feeling having played such a huge role in the Green Bill, Your Highness?”

Their words and questions assault me. I’ve always been accustomed to Andy ushering us up the stairs, but today, it feels more suffocating than ever. I’m dizzy. It’s hard to breathe. The sun is too bright; it hurts my eyes. The noise is too loud. I can barely make anyone out, only their silhouettes lined around the cars and behind the ropes. I think Dad is talking to me. I feel his hand press to my back, but the words make little sense, not until we’re finally inside and I take a deep breath that actually stings my lungs.

“I’m thinking we should pass a law that doesn’t allow the press within a five-mile radius of the courthouse,” Dad snickers while smiling down at

me, but I’m afraid I can’t mirror his expression. My head is throbbing. “Why don’t you rest in the lounge for a bit, Aron? We have time.”

“Right, yeah, I’ll do that.” I walk away, feeling sluggish. I wonder if this is what it’s like to be a zombie because my mind is fixated on one thing: the couch in the lounge. My arms swing listlessly beside me, then I drop on the couch, groaning into the fabric, then kicking my legs and arms childishly.

Childishly. I’m feeling childish. Why am I so worked up? I’m fine. I’m fucking fine. Why can’t I stop being such a dumbass about this?! I have to do better. I’m not allowed to give anything short of perfection. If I don’t, then the entire country is going to be on me about it. If the bill doesn’t pass today, the news and the public won’t care to look into why, they’ll focus on the reasoning being me and only me. It’ll be my fault. I’ll be the cause for failure. I’ll be the disappointment; the useless son that can’t live up to his father. The erratic prince. The spoiled brat. The same boy from high school that only causes problems, that didn’t care about his image or the image of others, that threw responsibility out the window. I can’t be that. I have to do better. I have to!

There’s a knock at the door. Someone speaks, “Your Highness, the royal court is convening momentarily.”

“I-I’ll be right there,” I respond breathlessly, attempting to sit up, only to fall right back down. Something’s wrong. This feeling is familiar, like I’m suffocating.

No, no, no. Not now. Please.

My head is swimming, a constant pain like someone has taken a hammer to my skull. Everything hurts, from the tip of my toes to the top of my head. My senses are all over the place. The noises are too loud, surrounding me,

beating me. My vision blurs, swaying, mixing. Each breath is desperate, as if my body expects it to be the last. I hate it. I'm scared. It hurts.

I fall off the couch, groaning as I hit the floor, curling into a trembling ball of pain. Somehow, I'm numb and hurting all at once. The world shrinks around me, suffocating me, squeezing me to the point I worry I'll shatter. There's the fear of the press, the fear of others, what they're going to say. I swear I can hear them berating me. I swear I see the headlines on the back of my eyelids. I want to scream, but I don't think I can. Hot then cold, like a fever, aches and pains. There's fear and this constant worry practically screaming at me until my heart feels it's about to burst, but then there's a soothing voice.

"Aron. Concentrate on your breathing." There's someone here. It's Dad. He's kneeling next to me, rubbing my back like he always did when I was a scared kid. His voice is calm, but it's trembling when he says, "Take a deep breath with me."

When he opens his mouth, I do the same, taking in the deepest breath I think I've ever felt. My eyes water. When he breathes out, I follow.

"And another," he says, causing me to mirror the action. My hands are trembling, but the numbness in my fingers slowly diminishes. "Good job. You're doing good."

We continue this, slow and even breaths until I'm sitting up, finally breathing normally again. It's suddenly so quiet. I'm sweaty and tired, same as last time. How can so few moments make it seem like I've been running forever? And why did Dad have to see it? I can't bring myself to look at him, not even when he pulls me into his arms. I refuse to accept that I'm crying, but I am.

“I’m here, Aron, I’m here,” Dad says, continuing to rub my back. I thought I was the only one shaking, but he is too. “Let’s get you home and cancel all upcoming appointments. You need a break, Aron, a long break.”

“No way!” I shout, pushing away from him. My back hits the couch. I try to stand but my legs are jello. I end up plopping down on the couch. “You know what people will say if I call off!”

“Your health comes first, Aron!”

“You don’t understand! How can I leave when you never slack off?!” I scream, causing Dad to stare at me with wide eyes. Dad, of all people, seeing me like this. I hate it. I hate acting like this. I try so hard to be better and it never works.

Suddenly, everything comes pouring out without my consent. Every fear and worry whispered between my shaking breaths. “I’m not like you, Dad. I wish I was, but I’m not. No one takes me seriously. I’m seen as a joke. I see myself as a joke. How am I meant to live up to you? How am I meant to live up to any king before me? I can’t even give a damn speech anymore without freaking out. I acted all high and mighty as a kid when I gave that speech, as if I had any damn clue what it’s like. I bit off more than I can chew. I’m tired and stressed and nervous and scared. I don’t want to be a disappointment, not to the court or the public, not to you and Mom, not to Quinton or me, yet here I am, being a disappointment to everyone. I’m trying so hard to be like you, to stop being a kid, to be an adult, a good king, but it’s hard. It’s so hard. I didn’t know it’d be so hard.”

The tears won’t stop. I wipe them away again and again, but they keep coming, so I bury my face in my hands. That lasts all of a second. Dad’s pulling them away so he can peer up at me with kind eyes. He’s on his

knees, leaning in to speak to me in a soft voice, “I’m so sorry, Aron. I never thought that I put that kind of pressure on you.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“No, it is. I should have sat down and talked to you sooner.”

I sniffle. My nose is completely clogged. “It’s not like I said any of this to you before.”

“But I should have known. I had the same worries when I was your age.”

That surprises me. Dad gives me a crooked smile when I ask, “You did?”

“Of course. You know I was only 25 when I took the throne, after your grandfather passed away. I imagine you wouldn’t have gotten along. He was very strict, but strong and proud. I honestly don’t resemble him in any way other than appearance.” Dad chuckles at his own memories, but there’s a certain distaste to it, like he’s thinking of some bad memories in particular. “He was a force to be reckoned with, immovable, untouchable at times even, which I could never compare to. When I was pitted against him, seen as the son lesser than his father, it drove me mad. I felt like I was letting my whole country down because I wasn’t as good as him.”

“But you’re a great king,” I mumble. I’ve heard and seen people belittle Dad, but the large majority of the country loves him. I can’t even wrap my head around there being a time when they weren’t overwhelmingly pleased with his rule.

“Ah, there it is.” Dad taps my nose with a kind smile. “A great king, like how I saw my father and how you see me.” Dad takes both my hands in his, holding them tight, as if he’s lifting me up. “I am not my father and you are not me, Aron. You’re you.”

“That’s the problem.”

“It sure as hell isn’t,” Dad interrupts. I can’t describe the smile on his face, but it makes my heart warm. “You are not a disappointment. You are and will continue to go through the same things I did, and I’m so damn sorry for that. This is not an easy journey, but I will be here beside you every step of the way. The question now is, do you want this?”

“What?” I ask, unsure of what he means.

“I’m asking if you want to be king. If you don’t, then you don’t have to be. I want you to know that.”

I’ve considered this myself, but my answer remains, even after all this time. I nod. “I want to be king.”

“Ok, then my advice to you is this,” Dad stands, pulling me up with him. He presses his hands to my shoulders, holding tight when he says, “Don’t let anyone control you, Aron. Don’t let them tear you down. Be the loud, funny, and kind boy that you have always been. Be reckless. Be childish. Act your age. Get into trouble. Just be you, because you’re amazing just the way you are. Show the world who you are. Show them the son I couldn’t be more proud of, the son that isn’t going to be like me because he’s already a thousand times better.”

I bury my face in Dad’s shoulder. He holds me tight, saying nothing about the tears against his neck. He’s warm and comforting and smells like home. I don’t care if I’m 22, I’m going to bawl my eyes out like a toddler that lost their toy because, right now, it feels like I’ve finally learned how to breathe. All this time, I’ve been holding my breath. Finally, someone taught me how to release it, how to take another. Of course it’d be my dad.

I’ve always looked up to him, even on the rare occasion that we were angry at one another. He’s always been the person I strived to reach, but never thought I could. How could I live up to someone so great? How could

I be so kind and generous? How could I always know what to say or do? Even now, in a situation that I didn't think could be salvaged, Dad lifts me up, makes me think that maybe he's right. Maybe it's ok to be me, flaws and all.

All this time I've been wondering where I've gone. Seems I've always been here, just hidden under who I've been trying to make myself to be. Dad is right. That scares me, but he is right. I'm not him. I'm my own person and once I was ok with that. Years of spotlight and stress have changed me, but I'm still me. I'm still here. I can learn to be me again, little by little.

"I'm sorry, Aron," Dad whispers against my temple. "All this time you've been pushing yourself like this and I didn't realize. It must have been tough, but you've done a good job to get this far. You've done well."

And somehow he still gives me compliments. No wonder I acted like a brat as a kid! I really am spoiled, but I wouldn't have Dad any other way. When we pull apart, Dad smiles. His question comes out almost as a challenge. "So, what are you going to do now?"

There really must be some of me left because I'm happy to say I accept his challenge by grinning. "Something reckless."

"Good." He winks. "Get to it then."

"I trust you can let everyone know I won't be attending?" My heart races at the thought. Already I can hear the news, imagine the headlines, but I take a deep breath. I know later this will bug me, but right now, while I have the courage, I'm gonna do this.

"Absolutely." Dad pushes me towards the door. "Get going."

I do exactly that, rushing for the door that I hesitate at. Dad raises a brow when I face him, my hand lingering on the doorknob.

“Thanks, Dad,” I tell him with a wide smile. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he says without hesitation, and I can’t explain how good it feels to hear that. It gives me the courage to run out the door, calling for Jeremy to give me a ride.

“Ah, but His Majesty—”

“He’ll figure it out. Let’s go!” I interrupt the poor driver that must now put up with my frantic steps. There are eyes on me, members of the court watching the prince rush to the back doors. There’s no one there save for security, so Jeremy gets the car around back with ease. My heart is racing, but I don’t know if it’s from nerves or excitement.

I can do this. I should do this. Autumn told me to stop trying to be something I’m not. Langley told me to be more selfish and Dad believes in me as I am. They’re all right. They’ve always been right. Quinton too. Always telling me to take a break, always trying to be himself, trying to let us be ourselves in public. He’s always been there, and I neglected him. I didn’t mean to; I was just…

Lost.

I still am. I’m finding my way back, finding a way to be what I once was and tie it into who I am now. I can do it. I’ve stood against worse! Like Quinton in highschool. He was a far stronger villain. I made friends, friends that are still with me and will continue to be. I have a foundation, one far more sturdy than I ever realized. I don’t know how long it will take. I don’t know how many troubles I’ll have to survive along the way, but I will not let the public tear me down. I will show them who I am. I’m…

I’m Aron fucking Vaughn, and damn it, I am pretty freaking great!

“Your Highness, where exactly are we going?” Jeremy asks, smiling sheepishly at me through the rearview mirror.

And that, my friend, is an excellent question! I honestly don't know, seeing as this is a spur-of-the-moment decision, but I know who I want to see, who I want to talk to. The question of if he'll talk to me is something else entirely.

"Pierre's," I answer, recalling the restaurant that Quinton enjoyed frequenting the most. Jeremy nods eagerly. He rolls up the window when I pull out my phone. Unfortunately, Quinton blocked my number, so I call Autumn, who answered pretty quickly.

"Aron, shouldn't you be at the vote?" she asks.

There's sorrow in her voice and I can guess why, but I don't ask. I cut right to the chase. "Call Quinton for me. Tell him I'll be at Pierre's. I'm on my way now. I'll wait as long as I need."

"Uh... wha... Aron, is that a good idea? Wait, you're on your way?!" I hear something drop and Autumn hiss. "Ah, what about the vote?"

"I left."

"Huh?"

"Dad is going to handle it." I can't believe how relieving that is to say.

"But today is a big deal, um, is there something going on?"

"Kind of," I answer, feeling a smile coming on. Not forced, but real. "I'm finding someone."

"Uh…"

"Just call Quinton for me, please?"

"Ok, but I can't guarantee that he'll come," she whispers, sounding apologetic. I thank her for it anyway, hanging up afterwards with only hope that Quinton will show and hope that, somehow, I can make things right.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Quinton

"He what?"

"Aron wants to meet up at Pierre's," Autumn repeats, sounding as confused as I feel.

"After the vote?"

"No, apparently he canceled?"

"Why does it sound like you're asking me?"

"I don't really get what's going on. He called, asked me to contact you, said his dad was handling the vote, and he'd wait for you for as long as he needed."

"...what?"

"I don't know, Quinton, he's probably officially going crazy!" Autumn groans helplessly on the line. "Today is—or was supposed to be your anniversary."

I wish she hadn’t reminded me. I’ve been acting like I didn’t know all day.

“Maybe he has finally lost it,” she adds. She’s concerned. So am I. “Are you going to go?” She asks after a few passing moments of silence.

I’m quick to respond, “No.”

“What if it’s... important?”

“There’s nothing we have to say to each other anymore,” I answer, more for myself than her. I’m sitting on a bench on campus, tapping my pen against a notebook. I wish to admit that I’m not tempted to go, but that would be a lie. I almost started heading for the car the moment Autumn told me the destination.

But I won’t. I can’t. We’re done. We have to be.

“I think you have something to say,” Autumn quickly responds. “Does he know?”

I bite my lip, choosing not to reply, which gives her an answer.

“Quinton, you—”

“I am visiting. That doesn’t mean I’m going to accept.”

I can hear Autumn rolling her eyes when she says, “We all know you’re going to love it and you’re already accepted. They are making an exception to allow you to join. You’re going to end up studying abroad, Quinton.”

“If I accept.”

“Which, like I said, you will!” Autumn grunts. “What? Are you going to let Aron learn from the news? That...Quinton, you can’t. It’ll devastate him.”

“It will devastate him even if I’m the one to tell him,” I argue. Imagining the expression he’ll make; I can’t handle it, but I can’t handle being here either. I don’t know how long I can last. At this rate, my resolve will turn to

ash before my very eyes and I'll be back at Aron's side, regardless of what that means for me. This is an opportunity to study in the US under the experts in my field. I have a full ride scholarship. I won't even have to ask for money for housing from Cora. I can take one more step on my own.

If I accept. I'm still uncertain I will, but the sad truth is, Aron is the only reason I'm considering saying no. If he knew that, he'd only feel guilt. Why? Why can't he understand that the future I want isn't focused on my job but on him? Is it because he doesn't feel the same?

I guess not.

"I will tell Aron myself in time, but I told you what happened," I add, after Autumn has grown silent. She hums in response. "He doesn't get it, Autumn."

"But maybe you should just tell him. Tell Aron that the future you want is with him, regardless of what that may be."

"Do you think that will solve our problem?" I groan. My head is throbbing. It always is now. "At every turn, Aron will blame himself for everything. What is he going to say when he learns about this opportunity?"

Autumn doesn't answer, only sighs.

"He worried about Northview. Imagine how he would react learning I may go overseas for three to four years. Imagine how he would feel if I said no to it because we got back together." I can already hear him, already see the sorrow on his face. My gut twists into a painful knot. "Aron will never accept that I'd be fine with going or giving it up so long as we were still together."

"You could work at it," Autumn mumbles, sounding unsure of herself. Understandably so. I wish we could work at it. I wish I could say the hell

with it, and go running back. No matter how much time passes, I don't miss Aron any less. If anything, it's worse.

"We're done, Autumn. That's it." I push myself from the bench. I have another class, but I don't want to go. "Tell Aron I will not show up."

"Quinton."

"I have to go. I have class." I hang up, but call my driver rather than head to class.

The moment I'm home, I finish up homework, which only distracts me for about an hour. Next I clean my apartment, so another forty minutes. I make dinner, twenty minutes, but can't stomach eating it so I put it away, seven minutes. I turn on the TV and flip through the channels for ten, watch some re-run of a show I don't even know the name of for thirty. Get up to take a long shower, another thirty minutes.

197 minutes.

Surely Aron left by now, right? Autumn must have told him I'm not going to show up. He's definitely not there.

He's not...

I grab my phone to text Autumn.

Quinton: Did you tell Aron I'm not showing up?

Autumn: Nope!

Quinton: Is he still at the restaurant?

Autumn: You could call and ask.

Quinton: No.

Autumn: You could go check.

Quinton: No.

Autumn: I'm not calling for you.

Quinton: Fuck you.

Autumn: Love you too, boo~

I don’t care. I’m not going.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Aron

Four damn hours.

Ok, three hours and forty-six minutes to be precise.

I said I'd wait as long as I needed, but damn it all, I'm getting really bored. And jittery. My phone is about to die from all the games and videos I've been watching to pass the time. I'm avoiding social media because I don't want to see all the shit complaining about my absence at the courthouse or wondering where I went since I was obviously spotted going in. The vote should be over or about over…

Ah, speak of the devil. Dad's calling. Maybe I should pretend I'm dead? I finally boosted my confidence and this may drag me back to earth, so please, no. Let's not.

"Hello?" I nervously hum, picking at the napkin on the table. My eyes constantly glance to the door, hoping to spot Quinton there, but alas, I am alone.

“Congratulations,” Dad says. “All your hard work paid off.”

“What?” I ask, feeling my stomach shoot up into my throat, in a good way.

“83 votes out of 109, that ain’t bad at all. Either people finally realized global warming is a thing or you have more friends than you thought.” Dad laughs. “Or a bit of both.”

I’d answer, but I think my mouth is broken. Shocking, I know. Maybe it’s my brain and not my mouth, that’s more believable. My brain has never been that great at proper function anyway so it certainly isn’t now. My hands shake and I have to get up to pace the room.

“Aron?” Dad hums. “You alive?”

“Agh, hmm, gah.”

“Are you having a stroke?”

“Maybe.” I plop back down in my chair, stretching my legs out and leaning until I’m basically an Aron blob. “How...how did the press take it?”

“Great, so far. You’re receiving a lot of compliments, especially from the youth. I’ll have Haddie go over some and send them to you. You should still steer clear of the news.” There’s noise all around Dad now. He must be on his way out of the courthouse. I even hear the car door open and shut. “Once you get home, let’s have a talk with your mom and try to set up a doctor’s appointment.”

“For what?”

“To check on you. You’ve been really stressed, and we can look into starting therapy?” Dad suggests, waiting patiently for my response that is taking a minute to give.

Although therapy is perfectly natural, I can’t help but feel nervous at the thought of it. What the public will say... but that’s what I’m always worried

about. That's what is causing all this in the first place. My incessant need to be, well, a perfect bastard like a certain someone—a certain someone that has finally stepped into the room and is watching me with a quiet stare. My heart skips and skips and skips until I fear it may stop in its tracks.

"Ok," I finally whisper, never tearing my eyes from Quinton, who lingers in the doorway. When our eyes meet, I'm pretty sure the world stops, but I may be a dramatic bitch. "We can do that. I gotta go."

If Dad had more to say, he's cut off by me ending the call and setting my phone aside.

"H-Hey." I raise my hand in some poor excuse of a wave that brings a blush to my face when Quinton cocks a brow. He won't step further into the room, remaining close to the door as if he plans to leave soon. Maybe he does.

"Congratulations," he finally says. Now it's my turn to cock a brow. "The bill passed."

"Oh, right, yeah, it did."

"Seems the court has more faith in you than you think."

"Seems so." My voice actually cracks. I flush up to my ears and practically melt at Quinton's smirk. He wipes it off in a second, but it's too late. I saw it.

"Are you going to sit down?" I ask, gesturing to the empty seat.

Quinton shakes his head. Ok, kind of a rocky start, but I got this. I got this.

"I was thinking you wouldn't show," I mumble, picking at the poor napkin that was once a nice white cloth but is now frayed along the edges.

Quinton nods. Seems he didn't think he was going to show either. I'm glad I waited. I'd wait even longer if I had to. But I should have been

coming up with what to say rather than playing games. Still a fool, but I guess that's fine. I've always been that way and I always found a way to bullshit myself out of a situation. Let's hope that I can do that again because I need to do that now more than ever. Quinton looks ready to leave. I see it in his eyes, sense it when he opens his mouth.

"I'm going to see a therapist," I blurt out before he can say a word and that shuts him up real quick. He's quiet, either too shocked to speak or waiting for me to do so. I'm twisting the napkin in my lap now, which I refuse to look away from. "I know I haven't been myself lately. Not for a long time, actually. I've been so anxious all the time, nothing like how I used to be. I used to be able to say fuck it, and do what I wanted without worrying about the consequences, but then I changed and I don't really know when. I grew up, I guess. No one said growing up would be this hard."

I face Quinton, wishing I could mirror that blank expression. My feelings are always written all over my face. I used to hate that. Now I'm kind of grateful for it because there's no way Quinton can deny what I'm saying to be true. Not that I thought he would.

"You were right. I was stressing over what everyone thought about me, about us, especially how they'd treat you because of my failure and that... that led to a few panic attacks over the last few months." That gets a reaction out of Quinton. His brows furrow. He finally steps closer. My eyes water, so I try to blink it away while saying, "It was scary. I thought I was dying and now I feel like these last few years have been one giant attack, like I've been teetering on the edge of one for a long, long time and something finally snapped. I snapped. I've been trying to be someone I'm not, trying to be my father and a king rather than just being Aron and doing

my best as Aron, as the loud, funny and sometimes kind person I actually am.”

The tension in Quinton’s shoulders diminish. His scowl softens.

“I get that now. I know that I’m really hard on myself. I know I can’t fix it all at once, but I’m going to try. I just... I got lost, but I’m gonna find my way back, I promise. Ah!” My eyes widen in realization. I wave my hands in a panic. “I-I’m not trying to make you feel bad or anything! I wanted to let you know and you definitely don’t have to forgive me. I’m not asking for that or, well, I guess I kind of am? I don’t know, but I wanted to tell you. I’m not—fuck.”

I twist my fingers into my hair, staring at the floor that I hope will consume me. “Sorry, I’m really sorry, Quinton. That’s all I’ve been saying lately, but it’s true. I’m so sorry and I want to make it all up to you, and to me. I want… I need to be more selfish. I need to care more about myself and more about us than what a bunch of strangers have to say about me or us. The media will never let up, but I will learn how to handle it better, in time.”

Quinton is quiet. Quinton has always been a quiet bastard. I hate that now more than ever. He watches me with that same silent stare, one that slowly shifts to something more. Something that words fall short to describe.

“What do you want me to say?” He asks, voice a soft whisper. “I’m glad, relieved that you realize that now. Therapy will help, but,” He ruffles his hair with a heavy sigh. When his hand drops, so does his gaze, fixated on the floor when he blurts out a secret of his own, “I’m going to the US next week.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been invited by Torsey University to attend their study abroad program in New York. I’m going to tour the campus, visit the city for a week, and start in August. If I accept.”

“If?” I squeak like a damn mouse that’s been caught by the cat.

Quinton nods. He seems to ask a question that I don’t quite understand. “I don’t know if I want to accept,” he admits. “The program will last three to four years, depending on my workload.”

I’m feeling sick again. The unfortunate napkin is about to be shredded into little pieces when I mumble, “But you will come back to visit over breaks?”

“I could, or I could refuse.”

This is a test. Quinton’s testing me right now. I suck at tests. I’m meant to be rid of them soon, with graduation coming up. I thought college finals would be the most painful tests I’ll ever have, but this moment is taking the cake for sure. Not only takes the cakes but also devours it before my very eyes, refusing to share even a piece. Now I want to ask what he wants me to say. Quinton is waiting for a response, seemingly a specific one, and that frightens me.

“Why do you want to refuse?” I end up asking, hoping to get a clue. He doesn’t answer and ok, I kind of already know the answer.

Because of me. Because even if we’re meant to be over, Quinton continues thinking about me and I about him. How can we not? We’re both hopeless fools at this point. Him even more so than I even thought possible. I would throw a damn celebration under much different circumstances. I wish this could have been proven some other way, like Quinton finally slipping on a sheet of ice and face planting in front of a crowd or being caught watching some weird octopus porn, I don’t know. Literally anything

but this because I’m not handling this very well. I know, so shocking to hear!

Being honest is best. I know that, and honestly, I’m pretty good at spewing shit out of my wit. Quinton has complimented me on it before. It was sarcastic, though, that doesn’t matter because I’m taking it as a damn compliment.

“I want you to go,” I tell him, watching his expression for any signs of what I may or may not be doing wrong. “If you like it, if it’s what you want to do, then I want you to go.”

“Because it’s the life I’ve always wanted?” He almost growls between clenched teeth. His eyes narrow, practically piercing me with the question, and suddenly, it clicks.

“The life I’ve always wanted, this sounds familiar.”

“Why are you the one to decide what I want? Why are you deciding what I should want?”

Oh.

Oh.

Oh.

I know I said I’d stop being hard on myself, but I still want to slap myself in the face for missing this.

But Quinton takes my silence as a bad sign. His heavy sigh is enough to crush even me. He turns to the door without a word. Dramatic bitch has returned because I swear the world has stopped spinning again. Every memory comes running in at once; Quinton slamming the door in my face. Quinton walking out the door and me letting him. High school—Quinton walking past me in the hall, making a choice, trying to decide my future for

me. That pissed me off. Here I am doing the same thing even after we both admitted to wanting the same thing; each other.

I don't want this anymore. I don't want Quinton to walk away. I don't want to give up, thinking that nothing will change, so I have to roll with it. Like I said, the media won't stop, the public and the council will always scrutinize, but…

But fuck it, right? We all have our problems. Maybe it's work, a boss, or our own internalized thoughts. We have to learn to deal with them in different ways, but I know we can make it through this so long as we're an us. I should have that tattooed on my forehead so I see it every time I look in the mirror and never forget!

Quinton doesn't make it out the door. I don't let him, not this time. And the bastard is legitimately shocked to find me gripping his arm to hold him back. I tug and tug until he stumbles further into the room with me.

"What are you—"

"I shouldn't have said that!" I cut him off in a rushed breath. "I got scared. I've been scared, and I still am, but I get it now."

Quinton hums. He's not convinced. I don't blame him. How often have I disappointed him lately? Not anymore. Annoy him? Yeah. Piss him off? Absolutely. But no more disappointment.

"I'll go with you."

Quinton blinks so rapidly I think his eyes may pop out. Now that is a mental image!

"What?" He asks.

"The tour in New York. I'll go with you, and if you accept, then I'll go with you in August too."

Oop, wait a minute.

“I-If you are ok with that, obviously,” I add nervously at the end, smiling sheepishly.

Quinton is at a loss for words and that’s saying a lot. The only thing he gets out is a whisper. “That’s rash.”

And he didn’t say if he was ok with it or not, but whatever, let’s keep this rolling.

“Haven’t I always been rash?” I grin.

“Not lately.”

“I know, but I’m going to fix that.” My throat is dry no matter how hard I try to swallow. My hands tremble. Quinton must feel the shivers seeing as I’m clutching his arm for dear life, but he hasn’t pushed me away. He observes me with this almost hopeful but also disbelieving expression, and I can’t blame him. I can’t blame him if he denies me again, either.

“And I’m going to fix us because that’s what we want, right? Us. A life for us wherever or however that may be.” I take a chance to slide my hand down his arm and take his hand in mine. He doesn’t respond to the hold, but he doesn’t push me away either. “Regardless of how things turn out, you in school or not, even me on the throne or not, so long as we’re together, then we’ll be happy. That’s what you wanted me to say, right?”

More silence. More quiet stares. No response.

Come on, Quinton, throw me a bone here! I’m shifting my weight from side to side, tugging on Quinton’s hand, then biting my lip. What’s he thinking? I really wish I could tell, but Quinton doesn’t show it.

Then he chuckles and smiles and slips his fingers between mine. My heart thumps in my throat when he suddenly leans in to whisper, “Took you long enough to realize that, idiot.”

Quinton closes the gap, finally pressing his lips to mine in a hopeful kiss.

Turns out, I’m not so foolish after all. I would like to take this moment to proudly say that I, Aron Lee Vaughn, have made the stick in the mud, Lord of Hell, Lucifer himself, the Quinton Andrew Underwood, actually consider the possibility of having sex in public.

Yes, a round of applause, please! The stiff is finally thinking with his literal stiff like the rest of the male race and it’s all thanks to me, the hot blonde boyfriend—maybe. Not sure yet. Haven’t asked if we’re actually together or if Quinton is just eagerly making out with me for pure entertainment. And yeah, I’m fine with the kissing and his arm twisting around my waist, crushing me against his warmth, but I’d like it more if it meant we were a we again.

Unfortunately, Quinton’s hand stops in its exploration up my back, which is covered in goosebumps. His lips leave mine, the both of us breathless and, somehow, I ended up sitting on the table with Quinton perched comfortably between my legs. Again, not complaining. I am fine with the idea of sex. It’s been a while. My hand pales in comparison, so if he could, y’know, lean back in? That’d be great!

I’m about to pull the bastard back in when he asks, “Did you talk to your parents about this plan?”

“Is now a good time to bring up my parents?” I ask, seeing as my hand is kind of tugging at his belt and his hand is kind of still up my shirt. That hand drops to the table next to me. Quinton leans in, raising a brow that states we aren’t continuing and, damn it all, why not?!

“Both have been wanting me to take a break for a while,” I grumble, crossing my arms, otherwise I will end up shoving my hand down his pants. Pouting, I stare off into the distance. “And we’re gonna talk about starting therapy whenever I get home. I doubt they’ll argue against me if I ask to

leave with you and it’s not like I can’t come back. If Dad needs me, I’ll hop on a plane and, well, there probably won’t be as many people bothering us overseas.”

I nod eagerly at my own thoughts. Here we’re a big deal because I am the prince, but overseas they’re more focused on, like the Kardashians or whatever. It’ll probably be a big deal for the first month or so of our stay, then die off. Or that’s just my hopeful thinking, I don’t know, we won’t know until we try it.

“Will you be able to handle a break?” Quinton asks almost hesitantly. I can understand why. All this time I’ve been working myself to the bone, fearful of what will happen if I don’t.

“Probably not at first, but that’s why I want to go on the tour with you. I’ll have an unexpected break and have some time to talk to someone until you leave in August.”

“And if you don’t end up coming with me in August?”

“Then I’ll come in September.” I grin at Quinton’s eye roll.

“You know what I mean.”

I knock my foot against Quinton’s leg, continuing to pout. No, scowl. It’s a scowl. I’m totally not pouting.

“I thought I was supposed to be the worry wart in this relationship?” I tease. “You’re the moody brainiac, remember?”

Quinton hums, then he raises a brow at my shit-eating grin.

“What?” He asks.

“You didn’t deny it.”

Quinton scowls. See, I’m not the only idiot in the room for not immediately catching onto something!

“Us being in a relationship,” I explain, taking a chance to rest my hand over his. When his gaze drops, I expect the worst. My heart is about to sink into the further depths of hell, or maybe not seeing as I’m about to be denied by the overlord of hell.

But then Quinton leans in again to capture my lips in a quiet kiss. One that picks me right back up where he holds me again, arms wrapping around my waist as mine grip to his jacket for dear life. I’ll never tell him how much I missed this, although I don’t think I need to. It’s probably very obvious by how quickly I take hold of him, by the quiet moan that’s pressed against his lips when his tongue decides that apparently it is answer enough. I’d laugh, but I’m kind of busy making out with the smug bastard.

When he pulls away for a breath, I point out, “That isn’t an an—”

He’s kissing me again.

“That’s not a yes,” I mumble out between the kiss and him assaulting my neck. Maybe sex in public is still an option? If so, this is going to be one hell of an anniversary to remember!

“We’re dating,” Quinton finally responds, but has decided that marking my neck is more important than this momentous occasion. I may be on the brink of tears, but a fond memory makes me laugh. This laughter stops Quinton long enough to look up with a curious gaze.

“Wait, what? What if I don’t want to?”

Quinton slowly grins at the memory that he recalls as well. He leans back. “After that fit you just threw?”

“It wasn’t a fit.”

“You were throwing a tantrum like a five-year-old in a candy store.”

“Because you were being an ass!”

The two of us chuckle. All the stress fades away. It’s almost scary the power this jackass has over me. Then again, he is the lord of hell. Maybe he has super powers.

“Why can I remember that, but I can’t remember anything from school?” I ask.

“Because you’re an idiot.”

“Shut up.”

Quinton smiles. So do I. And I wrap my arms around his shoulders, fingers twisting into his hair, pulling him for another kiss. I’ve missed this.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Unfortunately, there is no hanky panky in the restaurant. However, I am content with Quinton taking hold of my hand and guiding me to the car. I am more content that Quinton takes the car with me rather than his own. Even Jeremy is spotted grinning from the driver's seat.

When Quinton catches that grin through the rearview mirror, Jeremy bites his lip then asks, "Uh, where to, Your Highness?"

I look at Quinton for the answer that he ends up giving, "Home."

"Home being…?"

"The uselessly large castle."

"Uselessly large," I mock. "You realize the library, which is your favorite place, probably takes up more than anything else?"

"As it should."

"According to you."

"According to anyone with half a brain."

Jeremy’s grin widens as the tinted glass rises until he’s out of sight. I’m smiling too, and well, Quinton isn’t, but when is he ever? His eyes, however, haven’t taken themselves off me. His hand is still in mine. The car is warm, or maybe that’s just us.

“So,” I hum, rubbing the back of Quinton’s hand.

“So?”

“Is there anything else we should talk about?” Seeing as I’m feeling pretty confident right about now, and who knows how long that will last. Come tomorrow, I’ll likely be an anxious mess again. Maybe I should invest in a helmet so I don’t rip my hair out? I really don’t wanna go bald. I’m too pretty to be bald!

“I am sorry that I kept letting you down,” I grumble, staying shamefully in my lap. “I wasn’t putting us first and was freaking out over every damn thing, even after our talk at the park.”

Quinton grunts when relaxing against the seat. “Wasn’t like I ever complained to you about any of it, although I should have.”

“I know this isn’t an I told you so moment.”

“Don’t.”

“But I told you so,” I whisper, grinning at his low growl. He glares at me for it and I shrug. “I told you to be honest and complain to me, but you didn’t cause you had to be the oh so perfect boyfriend that could do no—”

Quinton grabs my cheeks, squishing my face together until I probably look like a damn fish. I scowl when he pushes my head from side to side.

“I’m the angry one, remember?” He teases, releasing me after I smack his arm a few times. “You should be sucking up to me.”

“Is that how this is going to be?”

“Obviously.”

“I didn’t miss you at all.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, princess.”

“And I totally didn’t miss that pet name.” But the smile on my face proves that’s bogus.

Quinton scowls. “It’s not a pet name.”

“It is.”

“Isn’t.”

“Is.”

“Isn’t.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, bastard,” I mock him again. If Quinton keeps this up, his eyes are going to roll out of his skull. Another mental image involving eyes. I’m on a—wait for it—roll today. Ha!

“So, why did Torsey University ask you so late?” I ask.

Had this been dropped on me months ago, I may have dropped dead of a heart attack. I’m not saying there aren’t nerves now because there definitely are. In the back of my mind, the worry remains, that this will all fall to shit and we’ll go through another fiasco that won’t lead to getting back together, but it’s different now. Different because I know where my problem lies and I know that I’m going to work at it.

“They didn’t,” Quinton answers. “I was offered the chance months ago. They kept a spot open until I got back to them.”

“Oh.” I bite my lip. “And you want to go? I thought Northview was your dream school.”

Quinton’s brow furrows for a second. I wait, totally impatiently, for his answer that is eventually grumbled between his gritted teeth, “I didn’t think I could get in...to Torsey.”

Say what now? *The* Quinton Underwood, probably the most overly confident sack of shit to ever live, didn't think he could get into Torsey?

"Stop smiling," Quinton orders, glaring at me all the while.

"I'm not smiling," says the boy, whose cheeks are actually hurting.

Quinton finally lets go of my hands to cross his arms. Like me, he'll never admit he's pouting, but oh bitch, he is.

"You didn't think you could get in?" I snicker then full on howl. "You didn't think you could get in!"

"Shut up."

"Hahahahahaha!"

"You sure as hell couldn't get in even if you had a thousand lifetimes to study."

"Doesn't matter because I wouldn't want to go even after a thousand lifetimes, but you," I stab my finger into his nose that he rubs afterwards. "You really aren't perfect!"

"Brilliant deduction, Sherlock."

My sides hurt. Oh, my god they hurt so bad, that's hilarious! Wait a second—

"I got in though," Quinton says as if he somehow read my sudden thought. His smirk grows until it is, well, purely demonic. He leans in to reiterate, "So I guess I really am perfect."

"Shut your whore mouth."

Quinton leans back once more, his grin remaining when he asks, "What will you even do if you follow me to New York?"

That is an excellent question that I must take a few moments to ponder on.

"Sight see?" I suggest, smiling at Quinton shaking his head. "Uh, become a taxi driver?"

“You wouldn’t last a day.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you’re you.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I growl.

“You’ve never had a normal job.”

“Neither have you. Your work study doesn’t count.”

“I’m not the one thinking of becoming a taxi driver.”

I slap my chest when shouting, “People would be honored to have a prince chauffeur them around town.”

“I doubt any would care, and I doubt you could get a job there.” Quinton suddenly chuckles. “Guess you’ll have to be a househusband.”

“Never!”

Since my taxi driver ambitions have been denied, we are at a loss, but such talks are set aside. We’ve come home and I love I can say we. I love how Quinton walks through the front doors with me hand in hand, and I love how everyone appears genuinely pleased to see him. Kingsley goes a little slack jaw at the door for a moment, then his whiskers wiggle in surprise.

“Welcome home,” he says with a nod. “To both of you?”

He glances at me for confirmation, which I give as an excited nod. Quinton hums in response, heading inside with me lagging. I turn to Kinglsey and he gives a thumbs up that I return. That’s right, be proud!

There are rushed footsteps coming from the hall. Quinton and I peer up the stairs. Mom’s voice grows closer as she shouts, “Aron, your father told me wha—”

Mom freezes atop the stairs. Her eyes glance at me, then Quinton, then our interlocked hands. I hold them up and wave proudly at her. Quinton

grunts, attempting to release me, but my vice grip is extra vicey today.

Mom's eyes suddenly tear up, then she practically soars down the steps, arms outstretched as she cries, "My boys!"

She says "my boys" yet goes straight for Quinton. Our hand hold is released, seeing as Quinton literally has to catch Mom, then stand there as she smothers him with kisses and squeezes him tight.

Um, hi, I'm still here?

"Oh, thank the heavens!" She says, combing Quinton's hair and rubbing his back. The jackass stares at me over her shoulder, then grins like the demonic bastard that he is. He even flips me off. This piece of shit!

"Mom, your real son is right here!" I holler, stomping my feet childishly as she continues to smother Quinton with love. "Look, he's flipping me off! Hello? Hey!"

"I know Aron is a handful." Mom sighs, holding Quinton's face to speak sweetly to him. "Thank you for coming back. I honestly don't want to bring anyone else into the household. Who could be any better than you?"

She pinches his cheeks, and he freaking lets her!

"My sweet, sweet future son-in-law!" She adds.

"Mom!"

"Oh, welcome home, sweetie." She finally releases Quinton to approach me. He rubs his slightly red face while Mom wraps me in a warm hug. I'll forgive her since she rubs my back soothingly while saying, "Scott told me what happened today."

"Hmm."

"Whatever you need to do, we'll do it." She doesn't let go of me when she leans back. Brushing some hair from my eyes, she adds, "You need to take care of yourself, Aron. You come first, you understand that?"

I nod. “Yeah.

Dad’s voice comes from the top of the stairs. “I see more than one congratulation is in order today.”

He comes down the steps, pulling Quinton in for a hug before he can say hello. Dad pats his back when asking, “Do I need to request some movers to return your belongings?”

Quinton probably whispered a yes because Dad grins when saying, “We’re glad you’re back.”

Quinton nods as Dad steps over to me. Mom lets me go, only to return to Quinton. She’s practically squeezing him to death, but he totally loves it. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be returning the gesture.

“Feeling better?” Dad asks once he’s over to me. He wraps me up in a hug.

“Loads.”

“I can see why.” Dad winks. “Something rash indeed.”

“I do my best work when I’m rash.”

“You sure do.” Dad whispers, “Did you tell Quinton about what happened today?”

“Yeah, he knows.”

“I’m guessing we all have a bit to talk about, then.”

“Yeah, about that…”

Dad tilts his head to the side curiously.

“Quinton is meant to go to New York soon to tour a campus.” Neither Mom nor Dad appear surprised, and that has me sighing. “Am I the only one that didn’t know until now?”

Mom nervously clears her throat, proving that she has been in contact with Quinton since the breakup. Dad shrugs and answers, “We have to send

security with him, so of course I knew."

"And I was not informed. Why?"

"Because I told him I would not be the one to break it to you." Dad gestures to Quinton over his shoulder. "Heart break duty was his problem."

I hate everyone. I am to kill all three assholes and toss their bodies off a cliff into a ravine!

Dad claps his hands happily, "But you know now and it seems all is well!" Dad looks to Quinton for confirmation, which he doesn't give.

"I'm going to cut right to the chase," I declare. "I'm gonna go with him."

Mom gapes. "What?"

"I'm going to go to New York with him and if he accepts, I'm going with him in August too...if that's ok?"

Neither of my parents say a word. They blink rapidly at me, pure confusion etched into their mirrored expression. Then they look at one another like they expect one to respond. Since neither of them do, I clear my throat to garner both of their attention again.

"I can come back to visit and work alongside you whenever you need. I obviously plan to speak with a therapist prior to leaving and, of course, after I leave too. Maybe I won't be up to going in August, but I'm going to work at it because I honestly think getting away for a while will do us both some good. What do you think?" I ask nervously, looking at Quinton for assistance.

He finally gives it by chiming in, "If it doesn't work out, I'm fine with coming back."

Wait, is that really assistance?!

"If I need to go to Northview instead, then I will, but we should give this a try."

Ok, I guess that is kind of assistance even if we didn't agree to him possibly ending the program, but I get it. I will say nothing. I want Quinton to be happy and, yeah; I want that happiness to involve me, too.

The parents are silent and I'm used to silence from Quinton, but not them. So I look to the demon for an answer or response to give to the silent statues in front of me. I thought the demon would help, but why would he? He merely stands there waiting while I panic. Screw you too then!

Then Mom cries.

"Uh…" I wave my arms wildly. Am I meant to hug her or run? Why the hell is she crying?! Tissues?! Are there tissues anywhere?!

"You want to leave?" Mom sniffles, wiping the tears from her cheeks. There's now mascara running down her face. I would tease her for looking like a raccoon, but I shall resist for now, considering the situation.

"Leave is not the word I would use," I mumble, squeaking, when Mom seizes hold of me. She buries her face in the crock of my neck. Dad doesn't look much better. His eyes are definitely getting watery, but he squeezes them tight, as if thinking that'll help. It doesn't. A tear ends up rolling down his face, anyway.

"I had a hard enough time with you going to school!" Mom wails and, damn, this woman should have been an opera singer with a set of lungs like that. "What am I going to do if you go overseas?"

"You were going to let Quinton leave—"

"I already cried about Quinton!"

I look at the man in question, who nods and says, "For about two hours at a restaurant. My shirt was soaked."

"It was mildly damp!"

Quinton mouths only to me ‘soaked.’ Mom wails some more. I gape at him. Just how much contact did these two have while we had our break, or break up? I don’t know what to call it now. Oh man, the news is going to jump all over this, seeing as we literally officially announced our break up. Now we’re back together. I can already imagine the—

No. No, Aron. We don’t imagine the headlines anymore. Fuck the media. Fuck the news. They should focus on topics of importance like global warming, health care, economics and, y’know, actual news, not my damn love life! Anyway, my mom is kind of squeezing me to death, so back to that.

“It’s not like I’m moving right now,” I try to relieve her, but that doesn’t work. She’s still a crying mess, getting tears and probably snot all over my shoulder. “We’re going for the week, then I’ll be here until August, or we’ll stay. I mean, once everyone meets Quinton, they’ll probably hate him and ship him back.”

That gets a soft giggle out of Mom. Quinton? Not so much. He glares, as usual. I smile, then look at Dad, who has yet to say anything. He’s mulling it over, biting at his bottom lip while staring at the floor. Our eyes meet and we’re both quiet for a moment before he sighs.

“Getting away would do you some good,” Dad says, causing Mom to whip around so fast she nearly sends me toppling over by the sheer wind power alone.

“What?” Mom asks. “You’re agreeing?”

“You’re not?”

Mom’s bottom lip trembles. She squeezes my arm. “I... I don’t.” She meets my gaze, tears streaming down her cheeks in droves, then looks back at Dad. “Our baby won’t be home for months.”

“It was like that when he was in high school.”

“But he’ll be so far away.”

“He needs to step away from all this for a while.”

Mom understands. I know she does. Not understanding isn’t the issue and I get that. She rests her head on my shoulder, rubbing my arm as he does. I grasp her hand, squeezing it and passing a smile when she looks at me. With a heavy sigh, she reluctantly says, “If that’s what you need, Aron. The decision is up to you.”

“Well, it kind of isn’t seeing as Dad will have to send the military with me,” I tease.

“I’m not sending the military,” Dad argues, but I swear I can see him calculating how many agents he plans to have around us. Knowing him, it’ll be far more than necessary, but I will cut them some slack, all things considered.

“We’re getting right on setting you up for a doctor’s appointment though, and getting your first therapy session in before going,” says Dad, which I don’t plan to argue with. That’s a good plan, so I merely nod. “You may end up needing to take some anxiety medicine and I want you to have it before you leave, if that’s the case.”

“Yeah, yeah, got it. Totally agreed.”

“Ah,” Mom groans, wiping at her face again. “My good mood has been ruined.”

“My bad.”

“If you plan to cohabitate overseas, then at least get engaged while there.”

I choke on my spit. Quinton turns around like he’s going to leave, but Mom catches him. She whispers something to which he reluctantly nods

and for some reason, that makes her squeal. Seems Quinton will need a doctor's appointment too because Mom may have blown out his eardrum.

He rubs his temple as I shout at Mom, "Why does everything lead back to marriage?!"

"It's been five years!" Mom swings her arms around childishly. "I want to plan a wedding!"

"What if we don't want to have a wedding?"

"You don't get a say in whether you have a wedding."

"I don't think that's how weddings work."

"That's exactly how they work." She pokes me in the cheek. "We're going to get you both in some gorgeous suits and I am going to wear a beautiful ball gown."

"You just want an excuse to dress up, don't you?"

"Shh." Mom pats my cheek. "It has nothing to do with that and everything to do with my boy's continued happiness."

Even Quinton knows she's speaking bullshit judging by his shaking head. He tries to head for the stairs to escape. Brilliant idea! I rush after him, brushing past both my parents to do so. Quinton grunts when I hit his shoulder before bolting up the steps.

"Hey, are we really done talking?" Mom shouts. I'm already waving goodbye to her as I turn the corner.

"We can talk more later if you want!" And I'm already down the hall, skidding into our bedroom a moment later. I freeze just as Quinton walks into our room, shutting the door behind him.

"What are you doing?" He asks, probably because I'm standing at the center of the room with my arms held out like I'm balancing on a railing.

When I face him, he probably thinks I've lost all my marbles because even I can tell how big my smile is.

"Nothing," I answer.

"Doesn't look like nothing."

"Was just thinking."

"That's a first."

"Fuck you."

Quinton sits on the bed, on our bed. It's like he never left. I sit next to him when answering, "I thought of our room."

Quinton doesn't get it based on his raised brow.

"It was just my room for a little while, but now it's back to ours." I shrug. "I just like that."

"Hmm." Quinton hums, his shoulder brushing against mine. Then my head is on said shoulder and his cheek rests against my temple. His fingers brush over mine, taking my hand in his and holding it there silently for a while. For once, I'm ok with the silence in *our* room.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Strange how many weeks went by where I slept in an empty bed and yet not once did it ever feel comfortable. But the night Quinton came home I slept like a baby; after a bit of exciting activity that may or may not have led to exhaustion, but I digress. I've continued to sleep with such intensity that when I wake I somehow feel even more tired. Such a deep sleep that my eyes are crusted and my mind is as woozy as a drunkard on a Friday night. And after the last few weeks I had, I would know. Ok, so I got drunk once, but that's not my point!

I wake up to a familiar sensation. Yet again, I am a teddy bear; Aron limited edition, 22 years old, stuffed full of unabashed love hidden by witty insults. Yep, that's me, and the one lucky enough to have that limited edition? Lucifer himself, who doesn't seem like Lucifer when he's holding me this tight, but that's how he gets you. He plays nice before snapping you in two like King Kong on steroids.

Quinton stirs and I freeze, waiting for him to settle. Once he does, I glance back at him, grinning at his ruffled hair that he wouldn't be caught dead with in public. Should have figured the brainiac would defy gravity because that's what his hair does in his sleep. He is a peacock, but not nearly as pretty, just chaotic evil in hair form.

I snicker at my own thoughts. Why wouldn't I? I'm hilarious. But then Quinton stirs again, so I bite my lip and rub my fingers against the arm around my waist. He even sighs in his sleep, which makes me want to roll my eyes, but I've heard it a million times by now, so it ain't shocking.

Glancing around the room, I spot my newly prescribed anxiety medicine resting on the bedside table. It's almost scary to look at, as if I'm staring my fears in the face. There's no telling if this specific medicine will work for me until some time passes. If it doesn't, we'll have to try another. Maybe even do some cognitive-behavioral therapy. It all really depends and I don't really like that combo of words; it depends. Not having a definite answer sucks, especially when thinking about how much I don't want to have another attack.

But it is what it is, right? The road is bumpy right now, but it'll smooth out. It'll probably get bumpy again, but if I figure out how to approach issues now, then hopefully they won't be so hard to do later. Hmm, when I think like that, it makes me wonder if I have spent too much time with Quinton. Perhaps his big brain energy has seeped into me? Not that I'd ever tell him that because his head is inflated enough as is. Inflate it anymore and he's going to lift off into space.

"Hmm," Quinton hums, stirring enough to show that the beast has awoken. I turn my head, grinning at his squinted eyes and a loud yawn that is pressed into the nape of my neck. His breath tickles, sending a shiver

down my spine that he obviously feels. His grip on my waist tightens, legs tangling with my own, acting as if he's doing it unconsciously rather than on purpose. I may be letting more things slide lately since I've missed the contact, too. Gimme another week and I'll be barking at him about it like we used to.

"The teddy bear would like to get up," I say. "He's in dire need of a piss."

"You could have got up," Quinton grunts and has not let go.

"I could have, but a certain someone has me in a death grip."

He snorts. "Didn't realize you've gotten so weak."

"You won't be saying that when I elbow you in the gut."

"Hn."

"Hn," I mock, which never quite works because I swear Quinton has an extra voice box that makes that sound since I can never get close to the original. It's weird and I hate it!

Quinton finally lets go, allowing me to sit up and stretch. Getting up, I have to hop over some luggage in the room to get to the bathroom. We're all packed and ready for our first trip to New York, which we leave for tomorrow. I would have waited until tomorrow to get it done, but Quinton kept pestering me about it last night! Saying I'd make them late, I'd forget and end up not packing everything I needed, so he had to help me otherwise I'd complain and—

He is absolutely fucking right, but I don't care. I'm going to complain about his complaining because I can and that's what I do. Thank you very much! And since we're leaving on our trip soon, it's currently spring break. We've officially got back together. Everyone is coming over for a visit today. I can only imagine what will be said, so I have prepared a few things.

“Why do you have this?” Quinton asks when holding up said prepared thing and, whoa, this is a rare sight. So rare that I cackle. I never thought I’d witness a full grown Quinton holding a nerf gun with the most confused expression I’ve ever seen.

“That is a nerf gun,” I answer around my chuckles, skipping through the room to his side.

“That’s not what I asked. Why do you have it?”

“Why not?”

“This is for children.”

“Bitch, please.”

Quinton rolls his eyes and inspects the device like it’s his next science project. He ends up sitting it aside, glaring at the gun as if it’s acid that just burned his superior skin.

“I need it for when our friends annoy us.” I hold up the toy that’s about as long as my forearm with a rotating barrel and enough ammo to shower them in darts. That’s right. I ain’t playing. Prepare for Soldier Aron.

However, Soldier Aron is in sleep mode until our friends arrive around lunchtime. The first to come are Nora and Cassidy, the latter of which is more deserving of an ambush. Nora is fine. She’s one of the very few consistently sweet ones in our group, so she’s safe.

Then there’s Ariel and Langley, who are both snickering buffoons when they arrive. I imagine Langley will be the first casualty.

And last is Autumn and Dahlton, the latter getting a usual Quinton snarl for simply breathing. I don’t have to worry about Dahlton. Quinton has him covered, but Autumn; the way she’s looking at me states that today is going to be the battle of a lifetime.

We’re all in the lounge, in our proper sitting arrangement. Autumn and Dahlton are in the love seat. Langley and Ariel have fit in the armchair. Nora and Cassidy stole the giant bean bag chair while Quinton and I are on the couch. All eyes are on us and by us, I mostly mean me and my sheepish grin. The nerf gun is hidden under the pillows beside me along with extra ammo.

“So,” Autumn chirps, practically vibrating in her seat. “This is an excellent development.”

“One that we all saw coming,” Langley whispers to Ariel, who merely giggles.

I melt into the couch while Quinton comes across as unaffected. He sits as elegantly as ever, uncaring of the knowing and teasing stares.

“Come on, don’t tease,” Nora says, smiling kindly at me, appearing as the only angel in the room. “We’re all thrilled for the both of you. We know it’s been tough, but it’s great that you’ve worked things out.”

“Nora, you’re my only true friend here,” I cry, reaching out for her until Cassidy smacks my hand away. Her narrowed glare states that if I try such a thing again, she will happily bite my fingers off. Ok, overprotective girlfriend, I have learned my lesson. Geesh!

“Oi!” Langley calls with a pout. “I’m here, y’know.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey! I stayed over to help you woo Quinton!”

Quinton scowls at the word woo, as if it somehow insulted him or slapped him in the face.

“A woo that did not work,” I’m swift to argue.

“Apparently it did, seeing as you’re back to fuc—” As expected, Langley is the first casualty. He curses when he’s suddenly showered with darts.

Ariel squeaks, surprised when said darts fall into her lap.

“Did you seriously buy a nerf gun specifically for this occasion?” Langley asks, rubbing his abused face while I reload.

“...no.”

“He did,” Quinton says. I attempt to kick him in the shin for the betrayal. He lifts his leg, so I miss.

Langley purses his lips. “I hate you and am also very proud of you.”

“As you should be.” Soldier Aron is activated and is observing the room. “Consider this a warning. Annoy me more and you will be punished.”

Autumn smiles. “Is that what you say to Quinton in the bedroom?”

I shoot at her, but she is as evil as her best friend because she drags Dahlton in front of her. The poor boy curses when his face is hit with a few darts. Then he pouts at me.

“Blame her. She used you as a meat shield!”

Autumn shrugs. “Gotta do what you must in order to survive.” She places her head oh so lovingly on Dahlton’s shoulder. The poor boy. I doubt he even realizes what he has gotten himself into and it’s too late to run now. RIP Dahlton. You were a fine soldier!

Dahlton tilts his head to the side, probably because I’m randomly saluting him.

“More congratulations are in order, though,” Autumn adds. “The bill you worked on for months passed and you’re finally taking some time off.” Autumn gives a proud thumbs up. “You get a big A for effort!”

“Speaking of time off.” I scan the room, noting that only Autumn doesn’t appear bothered, which isn’t unusual. She probably knew about Quinton going overseas before my parents did. I would have told Langley, but

honestly I've been busy getting ready to leave and, well, Quinton and I have been jumping each other since getting back together, so yeaaaah.

"Quinton and I are going to New York tomorrow. Mr. Fancy Pants here got offered a chance to study abroad." I stab said Mr. Fancy Pants in the chest with my finger. He smacks my hand away. "He's going to tour the campus. If he says yes, he'll start in August. I plan to go with him, so long as I can handle it."

Now that gets a reaction and by reaction, I mean dead silence as most of the room stares in a mixture of shock and confusion. I am surrounded by the rapidly blinking guy meme, save for Autumn and Quinton, of course.

"That's awesome!" Autumn chirps, clapping her hands in excitement. "Taking a break will do you good, even more so if you get the hell out of here. You'll probably get less media coverage overseas, after the initial move, of course. Plus, now we have an excuse to go to New York!"

Autumn stares at Dahlton, her eyes stating that, regardless of what he wants, they're going to New York. I doubt he minds since his eyes sparkle at the mention of an overseas trip. He's already nodding eagerly.

"Honestly, it'd be a good experience to live overseas for a bit," Nora says, once again proving she's actually the smartest one of the bunch. "You can have an outside perspective of what's happening in the country while you're away. And you can see how others live outside of the country."

I place a hand over my heart. "Nora, one of these days when Cassidy isn't around, I am going to hug you."

Cassidy glares. "Hug your own damn boyfriend."

"I give you permission to hug Quinton."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"The feeling's mutual," Quinton hisses.

I smack Quinton’s thigh in my laughter. He shakes his head, probably hating this entire situation, but my snickering is put on hold when I notice Langley has said nothing. I glance at my best friend, rather surprised to find him sitting silently. When our eyes meet, he frowns.

“How long will you be there?” He asks, almost hesitantly.

“Depends on when Quinton finishes. Could be three or four years, but we’ll come back to visit,” I quickly explain, hoping to wipe the frown from his face. “And if Dad needs my help or I just want to show my face again, then I’ll come back. It’s not like I’m going to be gone forever.”

Ah, I didn’t really think about how Langley would react, although now that he is, I’m feeling down too. I’m accustomed to seeing him almost everyday ever since high school. We share a lot of classes even now, but if I move, we’ll see each other when I come back for a visit. Of course, that goes for all my friends and it’s not like I won’t miss them, but Langley is Langley. He’s my best friend, the first person who really proved to me they had my back, no matter what.

“I know you’ll miss having a stud like me around.” I laugh. Ariel has come to the rescue, rubbing his shoulder reassuringly. She gives him a smile that he tries to mirror.

“I think it’s the other way around,” he teases, finally giving me a smile, too. “A day tops and you’ll miss seeing this gorgeous mug.”

Before we can get too emotional though, Ariel finally proves herself an enemy by asking, “So when is the wedding announcement?”

Her surprised squeak comes only after she’s been showered with plastic darts that she tries to smack away. She ends up smacking Langley right in the nose. While Langley is howling in pain and Ariel nervously apologizes,

Nora looks to Cassidy with a sad sigh, “Isn’t it wonderful to have our friend group back?”

“I don’t know about wonderful,” Cassidy replies with a coy grin. “But it sure as hell is entertaining.”

I glance at Quinton after hearing that, finding him already watching me. I offer a smile that he returns while taking my hand in his. Yeah, it’s nice to be back.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The time to leave is upon us. Our luggage is in the car. Mom tries to squeeze me to death. I remind her we're only gonna be gone for a week. This time. Dad pats Quinton's back, then we, thankfully, switch parents. Now Quinton feels the life leave his lungs as Mom constricts him and Dad allows me to breathe.

"I'm not informing the media of your departure until after you two leave," Dad tells me, which is an immense relief. I thought we would get bombarded at the airport. There's a chance we still might, depending on if any information accidentally got leaked or someone sees me, but I'm gonna be extra sneaky. Secret Agent Aron activated. Gimme some shades, a face mask, and a black beanie. I will be silent as the night!

"I admit, I don't like you being so far from home," Dad adds with a pout that isn't surprising to see.

“I’m surprised you agreed considering how long it took to talk you into letting me go to a public, but still private, high school.”

Dad grunts. “Not like you need my permission now.”

“Technically, I do.”

Dad rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean.” He then sighs when wrapping his arm around my shoulders, pulling me against his side. “This is the right thing to do, though.”

“You really think so?”

Dad nods. “Going out to see the world is never a bad idea. However, please stay off social media. Pretend it’s the dark ages, and the internet doesn’t exist.”

“I literally took the battery out of my phone this morning.” I pull out my pants pockets to show all I have is my wallet. My phone has been stashed in my suitcase, deep within the clothes. Folded clothes, might I add, which Quinton only helped a little with! “If you want to contact me, you’ll have to go through Quinton.”

“Good thing I mentioned it, otherwise we would have been calling you and freaking out because you didn’t answer.”

I give a sheepish shrug. “You would have eventually called Quinton, so it’s fine.”

“Not when you’re across the sea!” Dad throws a hand over his face. “Maybe this is a bad idea.”

“If Aron is involved, it’s always a bad idea,” Quinton chimes in, earning himself the middle finger from me. Mom would probably slap me if she wasn’t busy snorting into a tissue.

“Call us when you get to the airport,” she says. “And when you land, when you get to the hotel, tomorrow morning—”

“We’ll call. Don’t worry,” I interrupt her, knowing that she will go on for an eternity otherwise. “I will keep you updated on all shenanigans.”

Quinton scowls. “There will be no shenanigans.”

“The fact that you said shenanigans has added five years to my life.” I laugh before giving Mom a final kiss. “And there will be plenty of shenanigans. It’s New York City! The big apple!”

“Don’t treat this trip like a Broadway musical.”

“I am going to break into the best musical number in history as soon as we land.”

A vein is already throbbing in Quinton’s head. He grunts and slides into the car, giving my parents another quick and slightly annoyed goodbye. We’re off to a grand start!

I do the same, getting in after him and waving through the window until my parents are out of sight. Realization doesn’t sink in until we’re through the front gates. Sure, I’ve been overseas plenty of times. I’ve gone on my fair share of trips, but they’ve been only that, trips. Although this is only for a week, we may end up moving for a few years, so it feels like a really big deal.

“Nervous?” Quinton asks, glancing up at me from his phone. Seems he’s reading and has deemed me of some importance over that reading. How romantic. I’m movin’ on up in the world.

“A little, you?”

Quinton shakes his head.

I stick my tongue out. “Liar.”

“It’s just another college campus.”

“On a different freaking continent, one we may move to for a few years.”

“So?”

“You really are a damn robot.”

“Hn.”

“Think we’ll see any celebrities?” I ask.

“Hope not. One is annoying enough.”

“And yet you’re still dating one.” I grin and lean against Quinton, who attempts to flee, but that’s stupid because we’re in a car. He is crushed against the door with me, pressing my full weight against him until he presses two fingers to my forehead and pushes me away.

“I can fix that,” he warns.

“Your threats mean nothing to me, Satan.” I lean against him again. This time there’s no pushing away. He leans into the touch, continuing to read on his phone. I have no idea what it’s about, but I’m assuming some fantasy cause there’s some dude named Bayaz and that’s fantasy as fuck.

Satan has deemed me unimportant, and probably annoying, once more, thus he has ignored me. Getting Quinton’s attention after thoroughly annoying him has always been a challenge. Good thing I love a challenge, even more so now knowing that change is upon the horizon. Will it be a good change? Who the hell knows! But I think I’ve already hit rock bottom and the only place to go now is up. It’s nice to be an optimist again. I’ve missed myself!

By the time we’ve made it to the airport, Quinton has put in his headphones so he doesn’t even hear my taunts. Have I tried to steal the headphones? Yes, but he pinched me on the neck. Have you ever been pinched on the neck? It freaking hurts! Jackass.

Jeremy has pulled onto the runaway where our private jet awaits. My stomach does backflips, thinking that this is it. I’m going overseas and it

has nothing to do with work. Seriously, I'm not going to know what to do with myself. Play video games? Eat? Take the subway? Who knows!

"Traffic wasn't as bad as suspected, Your Highness. We've arrived early, so the jet is not ready to leave," Jeremy says after lowering the tinted glass. As he does so, my stomach growls, earning a chuckle from him.

"Why don't we head inside the airport for a snack while we wait?" I suggest.

"Probably not the best idea," Quinton responds. "If we're caught—"

"We'll be fine."

"We'll be surrounded by security and very obvious."

"Then I'll tell Andy to wait here!"

Quinton doesn't have to tell me that's dumb because it's written all over his face and, honestly, yeah, I know it's dumb. Doesn't matter, I'm going to give it a shot because my stomach is making the rumblies.

"Jeremy, inform Andy we're going inside for a snack!" I holler, hopping out of the car. Quinton has yet to move and Jeremy puts while doing as he's told.

"Let's go, Lucifer incarnate," I order the man that's continuing to glare at me. Then he releases a textbook *I'm so exhausted by you, Aron* sigh that makes me oh so proud. Quinton gets out of the car then watches me dig through our luggage for, you guessed it, black hats and hoodies. We have to look the part!

Quinton grunts when I take hold of his hand after our quick change, but still trails along beside me towards a back entrance. What can I say? I'm very convincing when I wanna be!

It's eight in the morning, but the airport is already crowded. People are so caught up in their flights that they pay little attention to us. The sound of

suitcases rolling across the floor, rushed steps, frantic phone calls, and loud snores echo through the halls. Quinton and I walk hand in hand, gazes down most of the walk to a small sandwich shop that calls my name. Some security tails us, but most don't put together that they're following us, probably just assume they're part of the airport. Lucky for us!

Andy orders food, seeing as both of our faces would probably be recognized. Once the food is in front of us, Andy sits at another table and allows us to eat in peace. The moment I take a bite, my stomach settles in appreciation. I didn't eat this morning because of nerves, so I practically inhaled the sandwich.

"Disgusting," Quinton says while throwing a napkin at my face. It sticks to my cheek, which is enough to tell me I have sauce on my cheek or I've somehow become magnetic to napkins.

"Shut up," I grunt. "I'll eat how I want."

"You eat like you're five."

"You mean I eat like I'm actually enjoying myself?" I grin. "I know you're jealous. Loosen up, make a mess."

Quinton does no such thing and continues eating as the supposed adult of this situation. I stick my tongue out, which does not disprove his accusation of my being a child, but that's not the point!

I have moved on to drinking my smoothie while watching the busy airport. The bill of my hat is tilted down, so I peer across the halls. There's some coffee shop littered with tired flyers and a store obviously to garner the attention of kids with stuffed animals, mood rings, and touristy gift cards.

There's a young girl asleep in her mother's arms, a couple sitting together half asleep waiting for a flight, a group of flight attendants either heading to

work or recently coming home. Not one of them looks at us, just two men eating at a sandwich shop. Will it be like this in New York City? A busy town filled with people focused on their own lives that likely know less about me, a foreign diplomat, and so may not even know my face. Some time away may make me spoiled, may make Quinton spoiled...

I turn my gaze back to Quinton. He has taken his last bite, remaining clean all the while, save for one crumb on his jacket, which I point out.

“Disgusting,” I mock him, pointing at the crumb that he dusts off.

“Speak for yourself.”

I glance down to see that, yeah, there’s crumbs all over my jacket. I frantically dust them away with an annoyed scowl that Quinton always accuses is a pout, and he is always wrong. Once I’ve cleaned myself off, I press my elbows to the table and lean in to ask, “Do you think you’ll ever regret it?”

“Regret what?”

“Getting back together.”

When Quinton sighs, I feel a lecture coming on so I’m quick to explain myself, “I mean, like thirty years from now after I’ve probably ascended to the throne and you have to work alongside me, do you think you’ll hate it? Not the actually being with me part—how could you ever hate that?”

Quinton snorts.

“But, like, I don’t know, giving up the chance to be some evil scientist in a lab. Do you think you’ll regret giving that up to be some old politician?”

“Maybe.” Quinton shrugs and I would be frowning, but he doesn’t give me the chance to because, sometimes, Quinton isn’t so demonic. “But if I do, it will be fleeting.”

“What makes you say that?”

Quinton doesn’t answer, so I tug on his arm. He smacks me away so obviously I tug more. Then he shoves his hand in my face and I lick his palm like the mature adult that I am. The grimace he gives me is worthy of going on SNL, which makes no sense. Why is he not ok with that but he’s ok with sucking a dick? I don’t get it.

“Why will it be fleeting, Quinny?” I ask, threatening more annoyance by poking continuously at his thigh beneath the table.

He swats those hands away when begrudgingly responding, “Because I’d regret not being with you more, dumbass. Take a damn hint.”

My face is probably bright red because of this dumbass, but it seems I, too, am a dumbass for loving this dumbass.

“Hint taken.” I laugh, which only has Quinton crossing his arms with a scowl that I, too, will claim is a pout, but I will be right.

“Don’t get moody with me,” I tease, taking a sip of my drink while muttering over the straw, “I want to spend the rest of my life with you too, Quinton.”

“Hmm, is that so?” Quinton hums. Now he’s the one leaning against the table, giving a devilishly charming smile when he purrs, “That almost sounds like a proposal.”

My legs shake. My toes curl. My heart skips and the question comes out before I can even consider if it’s a good idea. “Do you want it to be?”

Quinton is as shocked to hear it as I am to have said it, but his shock is meager compared to my own, wiped off in the blink of an eye. He shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. I don’t see any rings.”

Rings?

I swing my head around so fast that my neck cracks. Then I stand up, nearly knock the table over and bolt across the hall. This could be the

absolute worst idea of my life or the absolute best. I'm not going to even think about it. Up until now, hasn't all my best work been spontaneous, rash, and done on the spot without question?

Yes, yes it has, so this is going to be no different.

I toss a couple of bucks at the cashier when purchasing two of the ridiculous mood rings at their counter. They attempt to give me a bag for my purchase. No need, I'm already swerving across the hall to return to Quinton, who sits with a rather telling, what the hell are you doing, expression. One that only worsens when I take a big chance here and kneel on one knee because that's what you're supposed to do, right?

Get the rings. Get on one knee. Then fucking panic.

Why are we supposed to kneel when proposing? I bet if I asked Quinton he'd have the answer like the dumb sack of shit that he is, but obviously that is not the question that's important right now. Hell, the proposal isn't even the important question. Yeah, that's right, there's an even worse one.

Will Quinton answer honestly? That's the most important question.

Damn it, we didn't even ask each other out! There was no request to date, merely Quinton's moody order; we're dating, followed by my arguing that we weren't, although we definitely were. So now here I am, kneeling in front of Lucifer himself in some random sandwich shop at the airport, wondering if this is about to be a complete failure or the best moment of our lives.

There's crumbs on the floor and squealing shop assistants. The store smells like freshly baked bread and strong coffee. The floor is freezing and my knee hurts. The two rings in my grasp were not bought from some fancy jewelry store. Nah, they're plastic mood rings for children, which is the second biggest joke of this whole situation—the first is me, I'm the actual

biggest joke. Hi! And my brain is dead. Yeah, there's nothing. No words or speech to give because I'm shaking and staring and wondering what in the fresh hell am I doing right now?

Panicking, that's what!

Maybe Quinton is too. He's not teasing me. He's not saying anything, not asking what the fuck I'm doing, or berating me on my choice of location and rings. In fact, he's staring. Just staring at the stupid rings in my stupid shaking hands.

"Uh…" is the only thing I can get out, which gets some form of response.

Quinton finally tears his gaze from the rings to meet my own. That does not help. Quinton's gaze speaks far more than he does and maybe I like that cause I like his eyes, even if I constantly claim they're demonic. They're really not. They're warm and comforting, a deep brown that can ensnare you and hold you close, like a warm blanket on a cold winter night. Oh shit, now I'm getting poetic!

"I know these aren't the best rings," I end up spitting out.

"They're for children," Quinton says, but he doesn't sound put off in the least. "They won't even fit."

"We can get them adjusted?"

Quinton closes his eyes as if to say; damn it, Aron.

"This is a terrible start, uh, I don't really know what I'm doing right now."

"Do you ever?"

"Shut up, you're not helping, just," I try to appear as confident as I can, which probably isn't working with how hot my face is, but I'm doing my best. "What I should be saying, or really what I want to say, is that I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Quinton, wherever that may be. If it's overseas or here, whether we ascend to the throne or buy an antique

bookshop in the middle of nowhere and live in some witchy cottage with too many cats, it doesn't matter. Home is wherever we are. I love every damn thing about you, even when you seriously piss me off, and I think it's safe to say the feeling is mutual."

I think I'm saying something right because Quinton doesn't argue. He listens. If this were any other situation, he'd definitely argue. I can see him listing this way to tease about another day, but he's currently cutting me some slack, and damn it, I'm very grateful!

"I know I'm a bit, no, a lot of a mess. I know I have a lot of things to work on. We have a lot of things to work on, but my feelings haven't changed since our talk at the park. I want to marry you so." I swallow the lump in my throat, or at least try to. It only gets stuck more so that my voice is only a whisper when I ask, "Will you marry me, Quinton?"

I asked. Holy shit, I actually asked. Me. I'm the one that ended up doing this? And of course I'm the one that ends up doing it in the random coffee shop that smells of bread and strong coffee at the airport with freezing floors and two plastic rings…

Right after a rather big break up. Well, fuck.

My eyes widen when I sputter, "Uh, I-I understand if this is too quick, you can totally say no! Not to say that you can't say no if this wasn't too quick because, like, you obviously aren't o-obligated to marry me if you don't wa __"

Quinton cuts me off with a kiss.

When did he even move? Hellspawns have teleportation now? I'd try to figure that out, but I'm kind of busy kissing the bastard. Let's just say one moment he was in the chair, the next he's kneeling with me on the floor, crashing his lips against mine. I'm in no way complaining. His lips are soft

and the kiss is warm, as are his hands that rest on my cheeks, keeping me in place until he deems he is satisfied. But he doesn't pull away, only rests his forehead against mine, his warm brown eyes brighter than I've ever seen them.

"So, is that a yes?" I squeak, probably flushing up to my ears. The rings rest between us, clutched in my fist that is now resting on Quinton's chest.

"What do you think?" He teases with his signature smirk while resting his hand over mine. He flips that hand over to reveal the silly things that bring a smile to his face.

"I think you're being an asshole and not properly answering the question that took me an eternity to say."

"Indeed, it did. I am impressed with how badly you screwed up a simple question."

"I'd like to take it back."

"There are no take backs," he says, holding up his hand with a clear demand to finish the job. "We're engaged."

"At least that's a statement after a question."

Quinton smiles. Not that I'm any different. I wish I could tease him, but my mouth has stopped working again. Damn, Mouth, you've been failing me a lot lately. We're going to have to have a chat.

My hands definitely shake when I slip the ring on Quinton's pinky finger, since it's the only one that the ring can remotely fit. And by fit, I mean the ring barely goes below his knuckle, not that I'm any better when he actually puts mine on. The butterflies have returned in full force and they are kicking up a tsunami that could wipe out the nation, but I wouldn't change it.

Could there have been a more fitting proposal for two hopeless fools?

Since we garnered an audience; like the workers at the store, some of our security and the few people that found interest in the idiot blonde daring to propose with toys in a fucking airport. It was obviously time to go. That and the jet had been ready for, like, five minutes, but because of me sputtering out a proposal, Andy apparently couldn't bring himself to interrupt.

The dude continues blushing as he guides us outside to the runway. Some have realized who we are and take pictures, calling both of us while asking if that was really what they thought it was.

Oh shit, as soon as the pictures hit the internet Mom is going to be calling, likely to yell at me about my poor choice of location. But listen, it had to be done because the moment called for it and I sure as hell couldn't come up with a plan. That is Quinton's department! He plans. I flounder through everything. That's how this relationship works.

"What do the colors mean?" Quinton asks after we've boarded the jet.

"Huh?" I inspect the suddenly deep navy colored ring he's slowly twisting around his finger with his thumb, then I grin.

"If my childhood memories serve me well, dark blue," I grab his hand, holding it up like I've won a prize. "Means you are hopelessly in love with me."

Quinton smirks. "Is that so?"

He then glances at my ring. I try to hide the ring, but Quinton smacks my hold off him in order to reach over. He grabs my hand, mimicking me by holding it up to show off the obviously also very deep navy blue ring.

"Listen," I breathe slowly. "Mine is obviously broken."

"Hn."

"But yours is definitely accu—" Damn, Quinton is cutting me off a lot with kissing lately. If this is going to be a new thing, I'm actually more than

ok with it. I'm more than ok with it lasting forever seeing as that's the future that now awaits us.

I smile into the kiss, feeling Quinton smile back. His hand slips into my hair. Mine cradles his neck. After all these years, a kiss still excites me. His hand in mine makes me smile. I can't sleep unless he's in bed with me. I hate going a day without seeing or talking to him. I miss his teasing smirks and constant glares the moment he walks away. I've seriously got the worst taste, but I wouldn't change that because I love the bastard, evil incarnate and all. And yeah, I can confidently say that he loves me too; the blonde-haired, blue-eyed bimbo that pisses him off more times than not.

What a familiar feeling this is, the one telling me that neither of us truly knows what awaits us in New York. Maybe Quinton will hate the place. Maybe he'll love it. Maybe we'll go home and he'll go to Northview. Maybe we'll move to New York for the next few years. The future really is never certain. The only thing for certain in life is that life is never certain. I thought that same thing back in high school, too. Funny.

What would teenage Aron say to this? Would he laugh at the idea of marriage with his once arch enemy, or would he be relieved to know that we've come so far? Back then, I definitely couldn't imagine this. I was so confident that I'd persist and do my best, as if that were so easy. I honestly thought I was doing that for a long time, but I lost myself along the way. I changed to a person I wasn't confident or proud of and that showed. I nearly lost the love of my life because of it.

I understand now, and if that was such a shock, then I sure as hell can't imagine what lies in our future either, but at least there's a starting point. Right here. The two of us on a plane going on our own adventure with a promise for a future together. It's nice to have that, like I've suddenly got a

firm foundation beneath my feet. How comforting that is since years ago I truly thought I had my footing, but life shoved me right back to the ground. It's strange like that.

When you think you're holding steady, something cracks and you're a mess to repair it. Sometimes you really are on the right track, having worked hard to get there, but there are always bumps along the way. I sure as hell thought I had worked past the hardest time of my life, but don't we all think that in high school? Then life happens and there's a new problem that reminds you that you're never set in stone.

The plane takes off. We're above the clouds, on our way to an unknown future. Quinton peers out the window. His hand is interlocked with mine in my lap. I lean my head on Quinton's shoulder, on the man that will never hear that he's my foundation because I refuse to give him that much power. But he honestly probably knows that considering how easily I say, "I love you, bastard."

"The feeling's mutual." I roll my eyes, smiling when he admits, "I love you too, princess." He then looks at me with a devilish grin. "You aren't still nervous, are you?"

I proudly shake my head. "Not anymore, are you?"

Quinton smiles. "Not at all."

Life may not be for certain, but at least our feelings are. That's enough for me, and that's enough for us to head together towards a promised future.

THE END

CONTINUE FOR TWO EXTRA CHAPTERS

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NEW YORK EXTRA CHAPTER

New York City is like the crazy uncle that you see once or twice a year. The one that's a tad intimidating because his age is unknown, but you're fairly certain he's too old to be wearing such tight leather jeans. How in the hell did he squeeze into them? And his hair is always messy with an unkept beard to match. The super crazy and moody dude that you can't deny has a certain appeal to him, even if he reeks of alcohol and cigarettes.

I desperately wish to visit this uncle now that we have an entire day for ourselves. The sun is up. The sky is... gray, but that's fine we can manage. The city is calling for me. Skyscrapers paint the horizon. Car horns blare like in every movie I've ever seen. From our hotel window, I spot Central Park, the only piece of vast greenery in an otherwise purely metal city. Shenanigans must ensue today and in order to do that, I have to face the beast.

“Quinny,” I whisper to the slumbering hell spawn curled beneath the covers. Around his neck is brown twine with his ring, one that matches my own. It puts a smile on my face. I thought we’d toss these things once we landed, but they’ve become necklaces instead.

“Psst, Quinny,” I call some more.

Quinton stirs, but doesn’t wake. Understandable, we arrived yesterday, but got little sightseeing done since we went straight to Torsey University. Because of jet lag and overall excitement, we made it back to the hotel and passed out right after dinner, but now I’m awake. Wide awake. Reeling. Ready to go!

“Hell spawn, please awaken. Your people await.”

“Hn.”

“Time to get up.”

The glare of doom is upon me, one that intensifies when Quinton checks his phone. “It’s six in the fucking morning.”

“The sun is up.”

“I don’t care.”

“It’s our free day,” I groan, throwing myself on top of him. He grunts. “Time to explore!”

“Be quiet.”

“Let’s go on an adventure!”

“No.”

I’m mercilessly pushed off the bed with a loud yelp. So that’s how it’s going to be? Ok, two can play at this game.

I grab Quinton by the waist and flip him off the bed. He curses when hitting the floor, tangled up in the blankets, so I straddle his waist and pin his wrists on either side of his head. The glare I’m receiving would make

most piss their pants, but I am not afraid. That's a lie. He'll probably murder me in my sleep later, but the less fear I show, the better. That is true for all predators and their prey. Wait, that would imply I'm prey. I'm not, Quinton's just a jerk—whatever, we're getting off track.

With a triumphant grin, I say, "Ask nicely, and I may let you up."

"You have five seconds," Quinton warns.

"Stop being a stick in the mud. Let's go!"

"Four."

"Quinny!"

"Three."

I roll off him, allowing the annoyance to sit up. The blankets pull around his bare waist, which I admire as he rubs his tired eyes. Suppose the view of New York can wait for a few moments. This is a nice view too. It'd be better if he didn't have a piss poor personality though, says the dumbass that proposed to the man with a supposed piss poor personality. I can't even pretend to hate him in my head anymore. Being engaged kind of sucks.

Thankfully, Quinton doesn't get back into bed. He heads for the bathroom instead, grumbling about a shower. Success, it is time to explore! I want the whole New York City experience. I want to be stuck in a long line of traffic, crowded on a subway, eat incredibly greasy pizza, spot some crazy fight that one only imagines happens on TV, witness some crazies being crazy in the streets, but most of all I must hear it, the line that is best said in New York.

"Hey, I'm walkin' here!"

YESSSSSSSSSS!

"Did you see that?" I grab Quinton by the collar, shaking him in the middle of the street as we witness a man shout at a yellow taxi just like in

Midnight Cowboy. The famous line, to think that someone would actually use it and I get to witness it in New York City. “All my dreams have come true.”

I’m about to wipe a tear from my eye when Quinton says, “You need new dreams.”

“Stop raining on my parade.”

It is now quarter past seven. We’re both bundled up for the cool spring weather that can’t decide whether it wants to spit snow flurries or rain. Regardless, we’re going to have fun today. We’re going to get some food, shop around and, of course, sight see. The Statue of Liberty is the first on our list, which we take a taxi to.

Quinton is more than happy standing on the sidewalk as I attempt to call one. Quite a few pass me by while I cluelessly wave my arms about. Andy isn’t so keen on the idea of taxi rides, but as suspected, the media doesn’t care as much about me here. We snuck out of the hotel easily, and Andy only agreed to this outing if he could tag along. We have a car, but I want the New York experience. A taxi finally pulls over to pick us up. The moment we’re in the backseat, we’re hit with a stench that cannot be described. Andy gags. Quinton scowls. I am on the verge of squealing.

“It smells disgusting in here,” I whisper to Quinton.

“It’s concerning that you sound excited.”

“It’s just like I imagined.”

“You imagined riding in a smelly cab?”

“This is the true New York City experience.”

“You’re the definition of an annoying tourist.”

“Hey, let’s get matching I heart N-Y t-shirts and hats.”

Andy throws a hand over his mouth to hide his laughter while Quinton groans, “This is going to be a long day.”

Probably for him. Not for me. I’m eager the entire way to the Statue of Liberty. I’ve never seen it up close. Now that I am, I’m at a loss for words, so I just point, then point harder and repeat this until Quinton finally asks, “What?”

I throw my hands wildly through the air, uncaring of the few stares I get from others in the process. “She’s massive!”

Quinton stands next to me, admiring the statue as well, but with far less enthusiasm as per usual. Whatever, he just doesn’t appreciate an amazing view!

“Mhm.”

“I didn’t know it’d be this tall!”

“305 feet.”

“Why do you know that?”

Quinton rolls his eyes. “You shouldn’t be so shocked by now. I excel more than most at just about everything.”

“Just about everything? Not absolutely everything?” I elbow him in the side and he easily returns the gesture.

“I’d like to give others the benefit of the doubt.”

“Your asshole ways astound me every passing day.”

Quinton shrugs. He shoves his hands into his pockets when a chilly breeze brushes by. Feels ten times colder on this island and probably twenty times colder when we were on the ferry! Of course, that cold gets even worse when we are at the top of the statue, viewing the world from liberty’s crown. I’ve never been good with words, so I sure as hell ain’t about to be now.

Describing the view from up here almost feels like a disfavor to the view. There's the island itself with all the small people below, like ants on a hill, then the deep blue ocean that sparkles under the morning sun and the city itself. From here, a city looks more like another world, something out of some science fiction movie. It's incredible. Even Quinton appreciates it, not teasing me and joining in snapping a few pictures. At least until I tug on his sleeve.

"No," he says, but my arm is already around his neck. I pull Quinton in for a picture that he's not smiling in, but I am.

"Can't you smile for one picture?" I ask, realizing that I'm sounding like my mother. Oh no.

"If you're in it, then no."

"Someone is extra crabby today."

"Wonder why."

"We went to bed early and slept on half the flight!"

"Hn."

"Don't hn me!"

This argument continues down the statue, to the ferry and all the way back to the mainland. Now I could talk about Quinton's excessively rude nature all day, but it's the experience I have when returning from the ferry that is in need of discussion.

You see, I am a child at heart. No shocker there. And as a child, I wander so it's no surprise that, after getting off the ferry, I get a little distracted and realize; I've lost Quinton and Andy. I would go to find them, but a certain gruff voice garners my attention.

"Hey, man," someone says. Pivoting on my heel, I am met with yet another New York City experience.

There is a very skinny old man hunched over in a trench coat with a foxy grin. Is this the moment that I get flashed by some creep in the big city? Maybe he'll try to kidnap me and lock me up in a warehouse until the SWAT team arrives. I don't know, but this child is frightened until—

"Wanna buy a watch?" His coat swings open to reveal him fully dressed, with rows upon rows of watches lining the inside of the jacket.

No flashing?! No kidnapping?! Wow, this is great!

"You won't find prices like these anywhere else. No, Sir. Look what we have here," he holds up a silver watch that looks the same as every other watch honestly. I don't see a reason to have a watch because, hi, that's what phones are for, but I am intrigued by the trench coat man and his many watches. He has me nodding eagerly along with his sale pitches until he presents a golden watch with small jewels above each number. "This is a very special piece. Tell you what, for such a fine young lad like yourself, I'll sell it to you for $60."

This is it! This is when you're meant to haggle!

"$40," I suggest.

"$55."

"$45."

"$50 and that's my final offer."

"Deal!" I practically throw a fifty at him and take the watch just in time to hear Quinton shout.

"Aron!"

I spin around to find both him and Andy walking over to me. Trench coat man has bolted while I'm proudly holding up my successfully haggled gift.

"Quinton, I got you a watch!" I wave it around in his face when he walks up to me.

“Did you seriously buy something off a man in a trench coat?” He asks, not appreciating all the hard work I put in for him. I haggled! Appreciate my efforts, damn it!

“It’s a nice watch. I got it for $50. If you don’t like it, then I’ll just give it to Dad,” I grumble, then smile when Quinton snags the watch off of me. He inspects the watch like it’s a piece of shit that someone called gold and, well, it may be, but it works. It’s ticking fine and looks nice.

“You realize this is a knock off or was probably stolen, right?” He asks, and well, I didn’t think about that. Why else would the dude be wandering around in a trench coat?

I pout. “You’re raining on my parade again.”

“Your Highness, if I may interject,” Andy sighs. “Please don’t disappear like that again...and please don’t talk to strangers.”

Quinton snorts. I elbow him for it. “Shut up.”

“Didn’t say anything.” He’s putting on the watch, though, admiring the gift on his wrist. Yeah, that’s right. You better wear that all the damn time! I’m about to voice this until Quinton takes hold of my hand. “Let’s grab lunch.”

“Greasy pizza that will likely clog our arteries and kill us before we reach fifty?” I ask gleefully to which my companions grumble, but end up agreeing and taking me to the greasiest looking pizza joint we can find. And the food is damn amazing.

“I can die happily,” I moan, watching as the cheese goes on for eternity when pulling a slice from the box. Quinton makes no comment, but he has already eaten three pieces, so there is no denying his enjoyment of said greasy pizza.

“Where to next?” Quinton asks.

“Finally getting excited?”

“No. Just wondering if I will have to tie you to my wrist so you don’t run off again.”

I flip him off for that. “I want to go to ChinaTown,” I say.

“So you can get ripped off again?” Quinton asks over the rim of his drink.

“That is a perfectly well functioning watch.”

“For now.”

“Forever!”

“We’ll see about that.”

We finish eating shortly after. Our next tourist destination is ChinaTown, which is far more jaw dropping than expected. All the buildings are crushed together, some pale brick and others bright yellow to off white. There are shops after shops with large awnings and overhead signs, so that looking up is like peering into a thousand pop-up ads. They’re brightly colored, eye-catching so that you’re incapable of paying attention to a single thing for too long. Good thing I have a naturally short attention span.

Now I’m not sure if there’s an event today or if it’s always like this, but it’s crowded as all hell. The streets themselves are thin and filled with traffic while the sidewalks are just a bunch of us sardines squished together, meandering about. This may sound like a complaint, but it’s not. There’s so many people that I don’t have a care in the world. Quinton and I are nobodies, just two guys walking hand in hand through crowded streets with strangers. Having Quinton at my side with his hand in my grasp, I won’t admit it out loud, but that’s the real highlight of today.

I’m thankful we’re both black holes because the food, oh the food, there’s so much to eat and so little time! One restaurant to the next, we order bits

and pieces here and there to try. Delicious. Absolutely delicious. This is heaven. I am going to fall into a food coma!

“Take it easy,” Quinton says after I try to drag him into another restaurant. He puts a stop to that, continuing to lead me down the street to stop at a little open shop with handmade bracelets. “We have the musical to go to tonight, remember? At this rate, you’re going to fall asleep in the middle of it.”

“Ah, yeah.” I almost forgot that Mom booked us some last-minute tickets to see a Broadway show. I remember going to one when I was younger, but pretty sure it scared the hell out of me for some reason. All I remember is being curled up on Dad’s lap, burying my face in his jacket, then passing out and missing the last half of it. I didn’t appreciate the finer things in life as a youth, but it’s ok, I’ve grown up. I know better now.

“If you snore, I’ll smack you,” he warns.

“That’s spousal abuse.”

“It’s self defense for myself and the general public towards your snoring.”

“Drama queen.”

“Takes one to know one.”

Quinton examines a bracelet that I’m assuming is for Mom since it says Cora on it. He pulls out his wallet when I take notice of some designer backpacks a few rows down. Andy is right behind me, so I head over, kneel, and inspect the bags while the owner of the stand tries to sell them to me. Eh, I ain’t interested enough to buy, which I don’t directly say, but I imply it. Then I stand up only to be approached by a short man in a beanie.

“You interested in bags like that?” He asks with a cheerful smile. “I know a good place where they’re half the price.”

“Really?” Well, if they’re half price, Mom would be proud of me for saving money, and maybe I can get one or two.

“Yeah, they’re this way. Follow me!” The stranger guides me through the throngs of people towards an alley. There are a couple of other people gathered in the alley looking over their bought items, all coming from behind a large curtain in the wall. The stranger pulls that curtain back to reveal a wide room completely filled with backpacks, handbags, coin purses and more, all designer brands, too.

“Damn it, Aron!” Quinton hollers, appearing behind me with a huffing Andy in tow. Andy looks ready to die from shock, whereas Quinton grabs my wrist and growls, “Are you fucking five?”

“He said the bags were half price.” I point to said bags, probably with sparkling anime eyes because I’m that excited to see them.

“They’re knock offs,” Quinton hisses, picking one bag off the table that is meant to say Gucci but it actually says Gocci.

And the anime eyes are gone. Damn it. “Oh, well, I would have figured that out. I just got her—ahh!”

Quinton drags me away and Andy grumbles about finding some rope nearby.

“What’s this about rope?” I squeak.

Andy glares. “I’m tying you to Quinton so you won’t run off again.”

“Since someone insists on being a child,” Quinton adds.

“It’s not fair to double team me like this.” I pout, but follow Quinton begrudgingly back to the street. These two are ruining my grand adventure!

Quinton comes to a sudden halt, so I ram into his back. He grunts, but says nothing while I rub my poor sore nose. Then my eyes widen upon seeing what stand we’re at.

“Which one?” Quinton groans, gesturing to the multiple choices of, you guessed it, I heart NY shirts!

“Are you implying that you are willing to get matching shirts with me?”

“Don’t make me change my mind.”

“Classic white.”

“How original.”

“Do you want me to go for piss yellow or neon green?”

Quinton hums and shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” I snicker after receiving our shirts. Quinton is being a loser and only gets the shirt while I request a hat and a mug as well. I would have added a flag into the mix, but Quinton is a bastard and dragged me away again. Like I said, he’s ruining my adventure. Let me be an annoying tourist, damn it!

When evening comes, it is time for our musical. The sun sets when we make it to Times Square, which I have little memories of but have found that they pale compared to what I see. The movies don’t do it justice either. There’s simply so much to look at that I can’t take it all in. The lights, the colors, the traffic, the people, so much in a single space that one wonders how it can even be possible. Once again, feels like I’ve been put in a science fiction novel rather than the real world.

Obviously I’m taking pictures. This time, Quinton treats me like a child and keeps hold of the back of my jacket. If I attempt to wander off or get distracted, he yanks me back to him. I scowl each time until he asks, “Am I going to have to get you a leash?”

“What’s wrong with being excited?” I holler. “Look where we’re at!”

“A city.”

“New York City, ya bastard!”

“You’ve been here before.”

“When I was a kid. I can barely remember what happened last week, let alone what happened years ago. Besides, it has changed. Probably.”

Quinton rolls his eyes. He checks his watch, which is continuing to work —so far, so good.

“We better get going or we’ll be late,” he says when taking hold of my hand to guide me through crowded city streets. Streets that continue to pay us little mind. Andy and the guards are just another group of strangers behind us. Quinton and I are just two nicely dressed men heading to a show. Perhaps we’ll be noticed there, but for now, it’s peaceful.

This was definitely a good idea. Every breath is a relief, as if all the built up pressure over the last few years is slowly leaving my body. I like peaceful. I like it a lot, so much so that I smile each time Quinton glances back at me. He must not know why, because his expression states he thinks I may have really lost it. That’s fine, he gives me such a look all the time, so if I haven’t lost it by now, then I think we’re in the clear. But curiosity gets the best of everyone, so Quinton eventually asks, “Why are you smiling like that?”

“Is there something wrong with my smile?”

“Right now, yes.”

We’ve made it to the theater by now and are taking our seats. They’re almost smack dab in the middle. Other seats are filling up fast.

“I’m just happy. Is that a problem?” I respond, keeping my voice low, although the show isn’t even close to starting yet. I don’t know why, but being in this big theater makes me feel small, like I should be quiet.

“It’s nice here, isn’t it?” I ask, earning an eyebrow raise. “No one really recognizing us, walking around without any problems.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Without any serious problems.”

“I still wouldn’t say that.”

“Whatever. I like it here so far, that’s all.” I grunt and cross my arms, but Quinton loves to shock me. He swiftly takes my hand to place in his lap.

“Me too,” he says, getting comfortable in his chair. He says that like it’s a simple conversation ender and maybe it is, I guess, yeah, it is. Somehow simple but not, which only makes my smile remain throughout the entire musical that would have made me smile anyway, but that’s not the point.

It is not the musical that is going to leave an everlasting impression on me. No, no, it’s afterwards when Quinton and I are leaving and Times Square is lit up in the night. There’s so many people that I’m not holding Quinton’s hand. I’m clinging to his arm. Our guards are about to surround us to make some room when a very smelly drunk stumbles towards us.

Andy catches the woman that nearly tackles me to the ground. Her eyes are bloodshot, hair a complete mess, and lips as red as a rose. She smiles, showing off rows of slightly yellow teeth, one of which clearly has lipstick on it. Then she points at me, “You!”

I point to myself, and she nods before giggling. “You’re a cute one.”

Ah, a woman with good taste. I like h—

“Better keep an eye on that one,” says the drunk, waggling her finger at me as she winks. “Blonde hair and blue eyes, they like cute ones like that.”

What...does she mean by that?

The drunk stumbles away, disappearing into the crowd and taking my comfort with her.

“What did she mean?” I squeak, looking at Quinton, who seems as confused by our reality as I am. “What did she mean?”

“She was drunk,” Quinton answers, attempting to guide me from the scene of the crime.

“Who are they and why do they like blonde hair and blue eyes?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“What if we’re being followed?” I spin my head from side to side, searching the crowd for a threat. Soldier Aron is reactivated and terrified as he does not have his nerf gun, which would be useful in this situation. It’d hurt if I shot someone in the eye, right?

“What if someone tries to kidnap me because I’m a natural blonde haired, blue eyed beauty?” I whine.

“Then I’d have them tested for insanity.” We’ve made it to the parking garage. Quinton opens the door. “Get in.”

“I’m going to color my hair.”

“Aron.”

“I think I’d make a hot redhead.”

“Get in the damn car.”

“Brunette?”

Quinton pushes me into the back seat. I yelp as he literally kicks me in the ass to move over, which I inevitably do while asking, “Fine, black hair?”

“I’m not partaking in such a ridiculous conversation.”

“Because you secretly have a thing for blondes because of me, but don’t want to admit it?”

Quinton pinches the bridge of his nose. “I wish I left you in Gantia.”

And I throw myself at him, burying my face in his shoulder. “Shut up, you love me.”

He makes no attempt to argue, and his answer is pretty obvious when he falls asleep on my shoulder on the ride back to the hotel.

Our last night in New York City has arrived before we realize it.

Quinton has toured Torsey's campus, met professors, and possible future colleagues while I got into some more adventures around the city. I've tried all kinds of food that will likely lead to an untimely death, but it was worth it. And while paparazzi have recognized and followed me, it pales compared to home. This is the break I needed, the break I should have taken a long time ago.

"Do you have everything?" Quinton asks from his luggage that he's scanning over on the coffee table.

"Yep!"

"You sure?"

"Mhm."

Quinton's expression is one of utter disbelief. We both know he'll watch me rush in the morning to find whatever I realize I've forgotten, only to end up helping after laughing his ass off for about fifteen minutes. Although I know this, I still don't get up to double check because I'm being lazy.

"So what do you think? Are you going to accept?" I ask, moving from the hotel window to Quinton. He hums when my arms wrap around him from behind. He's fresh out of the shower, hair still wet and smelling of shampoo and body wash. I press brief kisses over his shoulder blades, feeling his skin break out with goosebumps beneath my lips.

"What about you?" He asks.

"I think your opinion is more important. You're the one going to grad school."

Quinton hesitates to answer, but I think I already know the answer.

"I like it," he says, peering back at me for my response.

"Good. I like it too. Funny enough, it's quiet."

“Quite funny,” Quinton says moments before a siren blares from the street below. He knows what I mean though, because Quinton has to notice it too. Our ability to go out and take a much needed breather.

“Hey, what’s that?” I ask, noticing a small black jewelry box among the clothes in Quinton’s suitcase. “You buy Mom some jewelry behind my back? If you did, I need to run out and get something too, otherwise you really will take my position as favorite son.”

For some reason, Quinton doesn’t answer. He’s stiff in my arms, then actually averts his gaze when I attempt to meet it.

“What? Is it something weird, like a tiny portal, that will send you back to hell?”

“You’re such an idiot.” Quinton tosses the box to me.

“Is this a prank?” I question, stepping away and admiring the box like I expect it to explode. It might, you never know!

“Open it and find out.”

“That’s not what I wanted to he—” And Quinton has shocked me yet again because no, this is not a prank nor a tiny portal to the underworld. They’re rings, a matching pair, a pair that I can guess I was meant to get on New Year’s and… “You let me suffer at the airport when you had these with you?”

He smirks. “Why would I stop free entertainment?”

“You truly are the worst.”

Quinton shrugs. “Can’t blame me. I didn’t expect a proposal.”

“But you possibly planned to give one yourself?” It’s my turn to hold up my hand to inform him to get the job done. Quinton does so, sliding the ring on my finger. I almost hate that it looks so normal there. “Well, these don’t need any adjusting at least.”

Quinton nods, placing one arm around my waist while I put the ring on for him. He hungrily kisses my neck, making my heartbeat in my throat. I don't know if it's from the way his hand is pushing past my shirt or the appearance of the damn rings. I don't realize my hands are shaking until Quinton interlocks our fingers and holds them over my chest. There, I feel my heart racing, and maybe his too.

With his hand in mine, my trembling is obvious, but Quinton makes no mention of it. He merely kisses me with a desire the same as my own, the same as the first time we kissed and so many times after. A kiss that tells me our feelings have remained the same and on par with one another for so long because, apparently, even in love, we have to try and best one another.

I'd complain, but that'd be stupid. Finding someone willing to love you above 100% is ideal and I'm as lucky to have the bastard as he is to have me. I wouldn't change him for the world, no matter how much I may tease him otherwise.

I love the feeling of his lips on mine, his hands on my waist guiding me to bed, his tongue evoking soft moans and his hips perched between my parted thighs when my back hits the mattress. We're kissing frantically, my fingers in his hair, the other caressing the warm skin, shivering beneath my touch. Heart racing, toes curling, pleasure building as violently as ever, like a vicious tsunami that only Quinton can make.

My shirt is removed so Quinton may mark whatever he pleases from my shoulder to my chest to my hips that shake when my pants are removed. Where they're sent, who knows and who cares. I'm somehow more focused on Quinton's touch, the feel of that cool metal ring on his hand that's moving against my thigh and the sight of the silly mood ring dangling

around his neck. I'd laugh if I wasn't insanely horny because why the hell am I thinking about the rings? Please, no one answer that.

My hands twist into the sheets at the first touch of Quinton's lips against my arousal. His warm breath makes my thighs quiver. Thighs that he eagerly opens to give him all the access he desires as he lowers his mouth over my cock. Then it's all pleasure as soon as he moves, quick motions of his skilled tongue and hand working my base.

Whatever I'm saying is probably a combination of his name and another language that only my aroused mind understands. The movements are too fast and too slow all at once. My hips want to move, to thrust into Quinton's enticing heat. At the same time, I want this pleasure to last for eternity. Let it build in my gut, slow and hot until white finally lines my vision and I cry out, hands now in Quinton's hair as he continues the pleasure until I'm spent. Well, spent for the moment seeing as Quinton is going for the end stand and returning with lube in hand.

"Rock, paper, scissors," I insist while Quinton drops his pants. I'm almost tempted to not play simply because of the fact that I know, regardless of what happens, this will be a very pleasurable evening. But damn it, I have pride and we have rules.

Quinton has learned to play along, sometimes. He holds out his fist and soundly defeats me two to one.

"I want a rema—" I attempt to argue, but Quinton isn't having it. His lips crash against mine before the first finger penetrates me, followed swiftly by another.

The soft massage of his fingers added with the touch of his hand on my cock, immediately rekindles the flames. My hand slips between us, eager to get a hold of him, to prove that I can make him as much of a mess as he

makes me. Quinton groans against my lips when my hand pumps his shaft, moving faster when his fingers curl inside me. I have to break away from the kiss, gasping for air, groaning, and thrusting into his fingers that are now prodding the pleasurable bundle of nerves inside me. My hand moves faster against his arousal, enjoying how he trembles. It's hot, hard to breathe, body only yearning, wanting more, wanting to reach that edge.

Quinton attacks my chest, now focusing solely on preparing me until I'm a panting mess beneath him. Acceptable only because I will be returning the favor at some point and, well, I desperately want to get off, so I will complain afterwards!

Quinton grips my thighs. His fingertips hold tight as he presses forward, filling me in one slow fluid motion that makes my toes curl and back bow. There's a familiar searing heat within me. A quiet groan passes my lips followed by another when Quinton moves, slow rocking motions and panted breaths that grow until I'm thrusting back desperately to meet him. Then Quinton is on the move, powerful thrusts rocking me against the bed. He leans in, skin slapping against skin, echoing alongside our pleasured moans. I grip the sheets, tear at them as the pleasure takes over. My body only knows how to move, to follow Quinton's thrusts that continuously give.

And once again, I notice it. The metal on my thigh, that damn ring on his finger, on the hand that's guiding my hips to meet his rough thrusts. I reach out in a silent request that he understands. Our lips crash together in a hungry kiss, bodies still moving together. My legs wrap around his waist, pulling him close while I grip his arm, wondering if he feels it; the ring. Does it drive him crazy too? I hope so.

“I love you. I love you, Quinton,” I breathe against his lips that are eager to respond.

“I love you too, Aron.”

I shiver, then moan when Quinton reaches between us to take hold of my cock. The added pleasure has me careening over the edge, crying out Quinton’s name from the orgasm rippling through me. Quinton groans, his thrusts erratic and desperate as he holds my hips with a vise grip. Then it’s my name he whispers as his movements lose their rhythm, but he doesn’t stop kissing me until we’re both utterly spent.

Quinton rolls beside me, breathing just as heavily with closed eyes and a blissful smile on his lips that I’m no doubt mirroring.

“Well.” I laugh, turning my head to face Quinton. “After that, I can’t wait to come back to New York.”

Quinton chuckles. “The feeling’s mutual, princess.”

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TEEN TROUBLES EXTRA CHAPTER

When Quinton and I adopted Cal, one of the first questions reporters asked us was; will you ever have children of your own?

They asked like we didn't already have a child of our own, a beautiful five-year-old boy who enjoyed digging in the backyard using plastic tools and climbing the small peach tree by the terrace. The only tree we let him climb seeing as he could get himself in and out safely, save a scratch here or there. But he wore those scratches proudly, often stating; you can't be an adventurer if you're scared of a little scratch!

I couldn't argue against that.

I could never contain myself when those fuckers asked that stupid question, either. My eyebrow twitched. My hands clenched. I wanted to scream in their faces that Cal wasn't some fucking accessory we picked up at the market. He wasn't any less our child. Blood relation didn't mean shit. Quinton especially knew that better than anyone. He was usually the one

who answered in a stern voice, so powerful it was like he built a wall with will alone.

“You know that we already have a child of our own,” he’d say, challenging them to remark otherwise. He may have spoken calmly to them, but in the car, he cursed as much as I did. In a very un-Quinton like way! I would have recorded it to spread online as a proof that Quinton isn’t the goody-goody man everyone believes, but honestly, I wanted to keep this side of him to myself.

Though we both knew that question would be asked, Quinton and I agreed we wanted to adopt after a lot, and I mean way too many, nights lying awake thinking about it. Years of research, of asking questions, of talking with our friends and family about what we should do next. I’m so glad we adopted because that gave us Cal, our sweet little Cal… who admittedly has taken on far too many of Quinton’s traits, but it’s acceptable because he’s cute.

I just never understood how anyone could minimize our love for him, how they could ever think; it’s different having your own child. I’d argue, by saying that, they’ve already failed at being a parent.

Quinton and I loved Cal before he came home with us. We loved him as we got to know him through our visits to the orphanage. He loved dinosaurs. Jurassic Park was his favorite movie. He always wanted an enormous yard where he could dig for dinosaur bones. I cried when Quinton suggested we pick up plastic bones to put in the backyard as a surprise for when Cal came home. It just hit me we were going to have a son. A tiny human to grow up safely and loved in our home. Finally, after so long.

Then the day came, when Cal was seven, that he called me Dad for the very first time. We never told him to call us that. Normally he called us by name, so I knew he said it by accident. A spur of the moment where even he went wide-eyed.

Cal had a nightmare, so we were eating cookies in the kitchen. All he said was, “Thanks, Dad.”

I didn’t mention it because Cal didn’t mean to say it, but he had, unconsciously. After I tucked him back into bed, I cried in the hall for a good fifteen minutes. I wasn’t given the title of Dad. I earned it. There’s no better feeling than that. He started calling Quinton Papa a few months later. And no, I never let Quinton forget he called me Dad first!

So yeah, we have a child of our own. A son who no longer loves dinosaurs like when we met him eight years ago. Now he enjoys locking himself in his room after I tried to talk to him about why I got a phone call from the principal about how he got into a fight at school.

“Callahan Vaughn, I suggest you open this door or I will be forced to take drastic measures,” I say while knocking on the once pristine door. Now it’s clad in band posters, half of which I do not know. When I ask Cal about them, he gives me The Look. A look that is strangely similar to Quinton’s You-Are-Such-An-Idiot expression, yet somehow even more snarky. It’s his way of saying, I cannot believe I have to put up with you, Dad. You’re so old!

I miss the days when he’d run into my office with a hopeful glint in his eye as he asked for my help in uncovering a very important find. That find was usually some plastic toy that his grandpa buried in the yard in the middle of the night.

The music grows louder after my knock, so loud that he definitely doesn't hear them.

"Caaaaaaaal," I try anyway.

"You know it's futile to reach him when he's playing Brand of Sacrifice," Quinton says. I pivot on my heel to find him heading towards me with his coat hanging over his arm.

"Just get home?" I ask, trying not to think about how so disgustingly sappy we've become over the years when I give him a kiss. A good morning, goodbye, and welcome home kiss are natural now, like they're ingrained into our bodies after 20 years together. Disgusting. Vile. We've fallen so low!

But I wouldn't change a thing.

"Yeah." His eyes squint as if he's struggling to stay awake. Probably is because he has worked extra hours at the lab this week since he hasn't had as many annoying social functions—as he puts it and I thoroughly agree with—with me lately.

"Why is he holed up in his room?" He asks.

"I got a call from the principal saying that he started a fight at school, but when I asked about it, he did the thing." I try to roll my eyes like Cal does. He's very good at it, like it's his own language. Quinton's disturbed scowl tells me I failed miserably. "The eye roll thing!"

"That looked more like a seizure, but okay."

"Then he said it wouldn't happen again and stormed into his room."

"Leave him be," Quinton says, puzzling me.

"Are you sure? Cal doesn't get into fights."

"Exactly." Well, that doesn't explain shit. Quinton heads down the hall. "He'll talk when he's ready."

“What if he isn’t ready until a decade from now, after we’ve forgotten?” I groan, walking slowly after Quinton. I peek over my shoulder continuously, hoping to see Cal sticking his head out of the door to say he wants to talk. Of course that doesn’t happen. “What if he takes this as meaning he can get away with stuff because we won’t talk to him about it?”

“He always talks to us about it,” Quinton counters.

“He always talks to you about it.”

Quinton stops outside our bedroom door at the far end of the hall. I almost ran into him.

“Damn, give a guy a warning before you hold up traffic,” I grunt, stepping around him, but he takes my hand. He pulls me back towards him, a knowing look in his eyes. “Don’t give me that look. We both know that he doesn’t… Cal doesn’t talk to me like he used to. He talks to you, though, all the time. You even know what bands he likes! I know it’s my fault that he doesn’t—”

“It’s not,” he tries to argue.

“It is, and you know it. We’re both busy, but I’m not always home. You are far more often than I am. Even the lab is a few minutes away. He sits with you in your office and talks for hours while I am lucky to see him every night for dinner.”

“But you see and talk to him every day, no matter what,” Quinton says. “You wake up early to see him off to school. You call when you’re away and text all throughout the day.”

“He never replies.”

“But he reads them. Every single one. I’ve caught him grinning over his phone while reading them on numerous occasions.” Quinton smirks, then rests a comforting hand on my back. “Cal’s a smart kid. Smart and

understanding. He knows you love him because you tell and show him that every day. He's just getting older. We weren't exactly the best at communication when we were teenagers either, and we threw our fair share of punches."

"Mostly at each other," I add around a grin that Quinton mirrors.

Quinton pats my back, then opens our bedroom door as he says, "Besides, he came to you first about Amara. Not me."

Right. Amara.

A month ago, almost two weeks before Cal's thirteenth birthday, he tiptoed into my office. He just stood in the room, staring at me with this troubled expression, like he had a big fart he was holding.

"If you're constipated, there should be some medicine in the bathroom downstairs," I said, grinning at the blush that reached up to his ears. Cal didn't like his ears, said they were as big as Dumbo's. He tried to hide them by growing out his dark brown hair that now curls overtop said ears. I always thought they were cute.

"I'm not… ugh." He ran a hand through his hair, then shuffled his feet. "My… my birthday is…"

"In two weeks," I finished for him. He shuffled his feet more. "Did you decide on what you wanted to do?"

He nodded, hazel eyes drifting across the room. "I'd just like to have a party here. With… with some school friends?"

"Okay. Anything particular you want at this party, or are we just going to set the kids loose through the halls and see what they find? I can't promise you'll stumble upon any hidden passages, I've already checked. However, we could totally make some fake walls to pretend like there are. You always liked adventure games."

“When I was, like, eight,” he interrupted, continuing to flush, but my gut told me it didn’t have to do with what I said. Cal rarely blushed, even when I said something embarrassing. “I’d like to have a big party, like, a really big one. A lot of cake and food and games and everything, whatever, um, just really, really cool.”

“Really cool,” I echoed, eying his strange demeanor.

Cal definitely copied a lot of Quinton’s blasé confidence, the kind of naturally cool kid who kept a straight face more times than not. He has never looked as demonic, although I may be incredibly biased because I don’t think Cal could ever be as bad as Quinton, that rotten bastard. This was one of the times the facade cracked, though, to show the aching nervous kid beneath who wouldn’t stop biting his lip.

“Is there a reason this party has to be really, really cool?” I asked.

“For fun?” He squeaked.

“Just for fun?” My expression must have clued Cal in that I’ve caught on.

With a disgruntled huff, he hurried to the door, where he peeked into the hall to check for anyone listening. Then he shut those doors. With a blush redder than a firetruck, he shuffled back to my desk to say, “There’s, um, there’s gonna be a girl… there. Coming. To the party.”

I bit back a smile. Or at least tried and failed to because Cal turned his back to me, arms up in the air as he declared, “I shouldn’t have said anything!”

“No, no, no, I’m listening. A girl is coming to the party, the really, really cool party. Does this girl have a name?”

Cal kept his back to me when he muttered, “Amara.”

Amara? I wracked my brain in search of anyone with that name. I had met all of Cal’s classmates, and then I remembered her face. We met on the first

day of the school year, a very sweet-looking girl wearing a pink hijab and cradling a drawing pad to her chest. I remembered because she dropped it at some point and Cal picked it up for her.

“Does Amara like really, really cool birthday parties?” I asked, rising from my desk to approach him.

“I don’t know. I guess?” Cal shrugged. “I was thinking if she came over and had fun, then that’d be… that’d be nice, right?” Cal gave me a desperate look over his shoulder.

“That would be nice, but if you like this girl.”

“Dad,” he hissed.

“Then the best thing to do is to tell her, otherwise she will not piece that together by you inviting her to your really, really cool birthday party.”

Cal opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. His hazel eyes drifted to his feet. “But what if she doesn’t like Just Cal? What if she likes… Callahan Vaughn, the prince who can throw really, really cool parties?”

His question slammed into me so hard I lost my breath. There was the same fear in his eyes as there was in mine all those years ago. I remembered why Quinton and I heavily debated not having children at all. Did we really want this life for them, where they worried about something like that? But we both hoped we could deal with it, that we could make sure Cal would be confident and happy.

“Personally, if she doesn’t like Just Cal, then she doesn’t have very good taste because Just Cal is pretty damn great.” I pressed my fingers beneath his chin, raising his gaze to look at me. “You know I worried about the same thing, but here I am stuck with your Papa and regretting every moment of it.”

That got a loud laugh. Cal grasped my hand, giving a crooked smile.

“You don’t need to throw elaborate parties to impress anyone, Cal. You’re great. Just you.” I pressed my finger against his chest, over his heart. “This here is what they should want because it’s made of the purest gold there is. We can still throw that party, but I want you to understand that your title has nothing to do with who you are. Anyone who doesn’t see that is not worth your time. Do you understand?”

Cal stepped forward, forehead against my chest, and arms wrapped around me. “I understand, Dad.”

We threw him that really, really cool party. He spilled fruit punch all over Amara’s dress. Apparently, she thought that was very cute.

Now, they are texting and calling a lot. Not sure if there’s an official dating status. Also not sure if I want there to be, seeing as they’re only thirteen. I was so excited about dating at thirteen, but it wasn’t until I got older that I understood parents shouting; no dating, you’re only thirteen!

Kids growing up are scary because you know what’s waiting for them and you’re desperate they won’t face the same hardships as you. Regardless of what the future holds, I’m glad that Cal has met someone who likes him. The real him.

I return from my thoughts to follow Quinton into our bedroom, arguing about his earlier statement concerning Amara.

“Cal only told me about her because he had to,” I say. “He knew he had to ask me about his birthday party because he’d never coerce you into buying a twenty-foot fire breathing T-Rex to impress her. Otherwise, it would have remained a secret, at least from me. He would have told you.”

Quinton tosses his coat into our closet, then removes his shirt. I hate that my eyes linger on him. We’re in our late thirties and he still looks this good? I’d say it’s great I caught myself with someone who ages like fine

wine, but it just makes me super nervous about the gray hairs I've been finding in my hairbrush lately. Cal pointed them out the other day, too. And Quinton snickered about them the other morning.

"You're right there. That was a colossal waste of taxpayer money. However, you are wrong about him keeping it a secret or telling me," Quinton says.

"Pray tell how you know this, oh wise one."

He halts in undressing, which admittedly is a little of a letdown. We don't get as much free time together as we'd wish, so I appreciate the view when I can get it.

"Cal has been and always will be a daddy's boy," Quinton states, pointing accusingly at me. "He enjoys hanging out with me, but he knows he needs to talk to you. Not necessarily because you give the best advice."

"Hey!"

"But because you have been in his position, the prince, and you throw around your grand speeches, that make everything right. You speak honestly from the heart because you spew shit out of your wit."

"Are you insulting or complimenting me?"

He shrugs. "Both."

I huff, but break into a soft smile when Quinton crosses the room to wrap an arm around my waist. I rest my chin on his bare shoulder, taking in his scent and warmth.

"You're the passionate one. I'm the calm one. Sometimes Cal needs the calm one. Sometimes he needs the passionate one," he explains.

"I feel like you know him so much better than me."

"Probably because he's like you."

"How? He acts like you."

“Exactly, acts.” Quinton retreats, revealing a kind smile. “Cal’s a teenager now. He wants to play the cool, aloof guy with no emotions because his emotions are out of control. High school is a clusterfuck and pretending not to care makes most of them feel safer, but deep down, we both know Cal isn’t actually like that.”

Quinton raises a brow when I run my fingers through his hair. Then he growls when I say, “These gray hairs may not be so bad. Yours have made you very wise.”

He shoves me away. “I always regret trying to lift your mood.”

“I don’t think you’ll be regretting it in a few minutes,” I say, heading towards the bathroom. Quinton watches me curiously, then smirks when I take off my shirt. “Are you getting into the shower with me or not?”

I smile when I step into the bathroom, hearing Quinton’s pants hit the floor behind me.

Cal never talked to us that night, the next morning, or over dinner. Not that he really could, since Mom and Dad usually chatter away with him about everything. Quinton and I didn’t tell them about the principal calling. We never really wanted him to be scolded by his grandparents. They’re here for fun, and fun they have. They both gush over Cal, talking about him to everyone, including those who definitely aren’t listening.

I glance at Quinton in questioning because we certainly can’t go days in a row without discussing what happened, right? But Quinton makes no motion to speak to Cal, even after he finishes his meal. Dad drags him off to the game room, anyway. That old geezer is seriously enjoying retirement too much. I should be the one playing games with my son, not you!

Instead, I have to drag my feet back to my office to continue the endless torture of paperwork. This is the worst kind of inheritance. There's so much. My brain hurts! I'm drowning in that work late into the night, even with Quinton's extra help earlier. I had him go to bed about an hour ago after he yawned ten times in a row. When there's a tentative knock at my office door, I expect it to be Quinton or my parents coming to drag me away.

"Come in," I call, surprised by a pair of wide hazel eyes watching me quietly. Cal's fingers wiggle against the door like he's prepared to slam it shut as he bolts in the opposite direction. "Cal, hey, what are you doing up so late?"

Cal may be thirteen, but he hasn't quite hit the Staying Up Until three am mark yet. Eleven is when he passes out. It's almost one am now, though.

"Couldn't sleep," he mumbles, slipping his hands into the pockets of his checkered sleep pants. A baggy Jurassic Park shirt hangs past his waist, proof that he hasn't quite left behind his love for dinosaurs yet.

"Isn't it a little late to still be working?" Cal mumbles. I see his fingers moving about anxiously in his pockets.

"Yeah, I guess it is." I set aside my work, pushing back my computer so Cal knows I have his full attention. "Why can't you sleep, bud?"

Cal knocks the tip of his toes against the floor. He shrugs in that scrunched up way people do sometimes when they're cornered or scared. "I, um… about yesterday…" His eyes darken, like a switch was suddenly flipped. "I shouldn't have gotten into a fight. Sorry."

He pivots to head for the door.

"Hold on a second," I call. Even I am not dense enough to miss that sudden switch. Or the way Cal tenses at the door, his hand gripping the

knob so tightly his knuckles whiten. “You came in here because you wanted to talk about the fight, right?”

He doesn’t answer. I take a seat on one of the couches in front of my desk. I pat the spot next to me. “Come on, we can talk about it, whatever it is.”

Cal eases the door closed, like he isn’t sure what he wants to do yet, so he thinks, if the door stays open even an inch, he’ll have a better chance of escaping. But then the door closes, and he stands there staring for a long moment. I wait, then watch him walk stiffly towards me to sit down, body rigid as a board.

“What happened, Cal?” I ask.

He shrugs again. Truly his favorite and most used response. I don’t know who he learned it from; me or Quinton. I’m leaning towards Quinton just because I want to blame the bastard. Then Cal crosses his arms and mutters, “It was just a fight.”

“You don’t get into fights.”

“You and Papa got into a lot of fights with each other, actually.”

“That… uh… we had our reasons.”

Cal stares at me in that Cut-the-Bullshit manner.

“What was your reason?” I ask. “I’m sure you had one.”

Cal knocks the heel of his foot rhythmically against the floor, trance-like. His fingers fumble together in his lap. “A kid at school kept saying…” He glances at me, then away. “He was calling you and Papa the F word.”

“Fuckers?”

He rolls his eyes. “The other F word, like, all the time and really loud whenever I came into the room. Then he told Amara that she was my beard, which I didn’t get because I don’t have a beard.” Cal rambles, throwing his

arms wildly in the air. I guess he acts like me because same. “So I googled what it meant. Do you know what it means?”

I don’t have time to answer.

“He’s basically saying that I’m gay too and just pretending to like Amara, which is really mean to her. I wouldn’t pretend to like her. I do like her! She’s funny and nice and really, I mean, really good at art. She’ll probably have stuff in museums one day.”

I nod in agreement, mostly because I find it adorable how proud of his Maybe Girlfriend he is.

“I’ve already told him to stop, but it made him do it even more. Yesterday, he said the F word again and, I don’t know, I didn’t know what else to do, so I hit him,” Cal finishes, pretending to punch the kid, although the speed of his fist would be more like a tap. Then he drops his hands listlessly into his lap.

“Why didn’t you tell us when you got home?” I ask.

“I figured it’d be better to get grounded and not upset you by telling you.”

“I’m not upset,” I explain, resting my hand on his tense shoulder. “At least not about what he said concerning us. You know your Papa and I have had that said about us for decades. Do you know what kind of people say that?”

Cal offers me a curious look.

“The kind miserable with their own lives, so they try to make everyone else just as miserable. They can’t think of what else to say. They tease others about what they’re likely scared of. Scared of not being manly enough or cool enough or fitting in with the status quo. They’re not worth paying any attention to, although,” I knock my shoulder against his. “It’s pretty cool of you to stand up to someone for us.”

“You’re not mad?”

“Not at all, although I suggest not throwing another punch unless absolutely necessary.”

Cal smirks. “Define absolutely necessary?”

“Only when he’s being annoying in a place where you won’t get caught punching him.”

Cal and I laugh. He surprises me by resting his head on my shoulder. Cal used to be a total love bug, but as he got older, he thought it’s not that cool to be cuddling with Dad. I make no mention of that out of fear that he’ll stop.

“I won’t do it again, unless I know I won’t get caught,” he chuckles.

I pat his head. “That’s my boy.”

Cal squirms so he’s facing me. Wrapping his arms around my waist, he mumbles against my shoulder, “Love you, Dad.”

I press a kiss to his head, wondering again when he got so big or how the hell we’re meant to deal with him getting older. “I love you too,” I whisper.

This must be enough for the teenage mind today, because Cal releases me to stand. “It’s late. I’m gonna go to bed,” he says, shuffling towards the door like he’s embarrassed about talking to me at all. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” I watch Cal step out the door and decide that now would probably be best for me to go to sleep too.

Quinton’s already in bed when I get to our room. I do my best to quietly join him, but quiet and I have never been friends. I stub my toe on the bedside table, hissing in pain, which immediately wakes Quinton.

“It’s after one,” he grunts. “If you keep staying up this late, those eye bags will never leave your face.”

“I doubt any amount of sleep could get rid of them.” I slip into bed, noticing that Quinton has already made room for me to snuggle into his arms. “Cal finally talked to me.”

Quinton stirs a bit. “Told you he would.”

I pinch his side. “Don’t be a bastard about it.”

I feel his smirk against my temple.

“What’d he say?” he asks, sounding like he’s struggling to stay awake.

“Some kid at school kept throwing around rude comments about us. Cal told him to stop. He didn’t, so he got frustrated and punched him.”

“And he thought we’d be upset if he told us what happened,” Quinton finishes, proving that he reads Cal as easily as he reads everyone else. It’s damn annoying. Useful sometimes, but only when it isn’t against me.

“Yeah,” I mumble.

“Are you upset?”

“No.”

“Not at Cal, about what he heard,” Quinton elaborates. He pushes me back slightly to peer down at me to use that damn annoying super power of his to see right through everyone. “We both knew he’d hear something like that sooner or later. I’m sure he has heard it before.”

“But he shouldn’t have to. Why the hell would someone say that, especially to a kid?”

“I don’t think people really care, considering we had worse said to and about us when we were still kids.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“It wasn’t meant to.” He hisses when I pinch him again.

I rest my head against Quinton’s chest because, apparently, cuddling makes me feel better now. Old age does weird things to you.

“Cal shouldn’t have to hear that,” I grumble. “He shouldn’t have to worry about what to do or to say if he does hear it. He’s thirteen, and should be worried about his math grade, and what the cafeteria’s serving for lunch.”

“Yeah, but I think punching the jackass is a good way of handling the problem.”

“I told him to do it somewhere he won’t get caught,” I say, making us both chuckle.

Quinton’s hands rub my back when he says, “Cal will be okay. He’s a lot tougher than anyone gives him credit for. All we can really do is prepare him and be here when he’s ready to talk.”

“It’s annoying that you always know what to say.”

“I always do my best to annoy you, and if you pinch me again, I’m kicking you out of bed.”

“How did you know I was going to pinch you again?”

“You’re predictable.” He actually kicks me out of bed when I pinch him. And I threaten a divorce that doesn’t sound so threatening as I crawl back into bed with him. We can both at least pretend it was a legitimate threat.

The problem at school seems to be okay. Cal actually mentions that he hasn’t heard the kid say anything since the fight. Then, about two weeks later, a very vibrant Cal sits at the dinner table with a far too eager grin. Quinton and I glance at one another, suspecting Cal to request something ridiculous that he knows he’ll get because I’m a sucker for when he acts cute. So much so that not even Quinton’s stern look will convince me to spare my wallet.

Rather than requesting something as ridiculous as the fire breathing T-Rex, Cal says proudly, “That kid was a jerk again today.”

Quinton cocks a brow. “And that is… a good thing?”

“If there’s a body, I can’t say I know a good place to hide it yet, but we can look.” I grunt when Quinton slams his foot into my toes beneath the table.

“There’s no dead body,” Cal says, but continues to beam. “However, he has a very bruised eye.”

“You punched him? Did anyone see?”

Cal shakes his head. “I didn’t punch him, but Amara did!”

Oh. I like her a lot!

THANKS FOR READING

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Notes from the Author

Original readers know this, but the third volume was actually written years after I finished the initial series. I was always scared to continue Speak the Truth after so many loved the series. Readers continuously asked for more, but it is rare for continuations to live up to the original so I thought readers would dislike a continuation. However, when the idea struck me and I felt I wanted to write something a bit more serious, particularly concerning Aron's anxiety, I decided to give it a shot. I'm very happy with the journey Aron and Quinton took from high school to college and now they're engaged! Our boys went through a lot. Editing this series after not touching it for years has made me more emotional than expected. I've had a lot of fun and I hope both the old and new readers have enjoyed this journey as much as I have. Thank you to everyone who purchased this series. Thank you for the support and stay on the lookout for more of my stories in the future!

Fun fact: Aron and Quinton’s trip to New York is lightly based on the trip I had when I was ten. Yes, I wandered off to buy a gold watch from a stranger in a trench coat and, yes, the watch still works. My dad wears it for special occasions. My mom and I were led to an alley by a stranger to buy possibly stolen purses and a drunk lady grabbed me after a Broadway show, just like Aron. It was fun to write about!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Twoony is a queer geek with a love for storytelling in all forms; movies, comics, books, games, and more. They write young adult and adult stories ranging from the always enjoyable teen rom-com to fantasy romances. At the age of twelve, they posted their first story online and have been addicted to sharing ever since. Although Twoony graduated from California University of PA with a Bachelors in Graphics & Multimedia, their true passion has always been writing. After creating original novels and comics on sites like Tapas and Wattpad, amounting over 105k subscribers and 7m+ reads, they have managed to live their dream. They are a full-time writer with three needy cats and not enough bookshelves. If you're interested in their work, they have a completed romantic trilogy called Speak the Truth and a standalone romantasy called Whisper Woods also available on amazon. Otherwise, follow their social media to learn more.

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